



CLEANERS' HEALTH AND SAFETY ADVICE



The outsourcing of cleaning to private companies means cleaners are treated like a lower tier of worker. Cleaning contract firms drive down wages and cut corners around workplace health and safety to win contracts and maximise their profits. This means that cleaners' workplace health and safety is compromised.

RMT has written this guidance to assist RMT cleaner grade members in the range of health and safety problems they face at work.

RISK ASSESSMENT AND EMPLOYER'S RESPONSIBILITIES

HSE five steps to risk assessment:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/steps-needed-to-manage-risk.htm>

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 employers have a duty of care to ensure the 'health, safety and welfare' of their employees. As part of this duty, they must identify and then risk assess any hazards to health and safety that their employees or others may be exposed to within the workplace or as a result of how the work is carried out. The HSE explain that employers should carry out an assessment before they do work which presents a risk of injury or ill health.

Risk assessments must meet a 'suitable and sufficient' legal standard. This term is not defined in legislation, but the TUC explain it to mean that all potential hazards have been identified, the likelihood of harm evaluated, and the level of risk estimated, and measures to control the risks to a standard "as low as reasonably practicable" (ALARP).

Risk assessments should:

- be written by a "competent person".

The HSE definition of a competent person is:

"Someone who has sufficient training and experience or knowledge and other qualities that allow them to assist you properly"

- assess hazards encountered every day and look to eliminate them. Where elimination is not possible, measures should be introduced to reduce the effect to the lowest level possible
- include RMT safety representative in the risk assessment process as the role of the representative is to represent the views of their members on workplace h&s issues, safety reps have a legal right to be consulted on risk assessment outcomes and to request that the assessment is reviewed if they think it does not meet the legal standard of "suitable and sufficient"



- identify hazards and evaluate workplace risks properly. Many cleaning companies only provide generic risk assessments. Generic assessments can be a useful basis for the workplace risk assessment, but are not a necessarily a replacement for the workplace specific risk assessment - as generic assessments may not meet the "suitable and sufficient" legal standard for assessments
- recognise the difference in men's and women's bodies. 30% of RMT cleaner grade members are women, the risk assessment must consider physical, physiological and psychological differences between men and women that can determine how risks affects them, for example in relation to lone working, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), the use of chemicals, bullying and harassment and manual handling
- assess in respect of new or expectant mothers where the persons working in an undertaking include women of child-bearing age
- include reference to age; the majority of RMT cleaner members are aged in their mid-40s and above. Which is the age at which the World Health Organisation (WHO) sees as the lower limit age when ageing could be considered a significant issue for some workers. UK workers are being forced to work longer under changes to state pension scheme and the abolition of the compulsory retirement age. For more information on Older workers health and safety, see HSE advice: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/vulnerable-workers/older-workers.htm>
- consult workers on the choice of ergonomic equipment and ensure that the equipment is adapted to their needs. This is very important considering the diversity of the cleaning workforce (e.g. women, ageing workers, ethnicity - one thirds of RMT membership identify as coming from ethnic groups other than English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British) and their specific needs.

Hazards that the risk assessment should consider:

CHEMICAL HAZARDS

Cleaners may be exposed to a range of different products. All chemicals cleaning products should have clear instructions on their use, where the product can be used, and if there is a need to wear any PPE, such as gloves or an overall.

Chemical use is covered by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations. For more information on COSHH see the HSE (Health and Safety Executive) website "**COSHH and cleaners - key messages**":

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/industry/cleaning.htm>

Data relating to any chemical used, including its disposal, should be given to the cleaner.

The exposure depends on the type of products used and the conditions under which they are used such as frequency, amount, and manner of application; the cleaner's breathing rate and the efficiency of ventilation during and after cleaning or use of protective measures to limit exposure and intake. Chemical substances may enter the body in different ways, depending on the product and the way it is issued - this may be through the respiratory system when it is inhaled, by direct contact with eyes or skin, or by accidental ingestion.

The British Medical Association (BMA) states that there is scientific evidence of increased respiratory symptoms in cleaners. Good ventilation is one of the ways in which this issue can be addressed.



Hands are the major body part where skin contact with cleaning agents can occur. Frequent exposure to water (wet work) alters the defence mechanisms of the skin barrier with the consequence that the skin becomes more “permeable” and more sensitive to other chemical substances. This can lead to the development of dermatitis.

Gloves help protect the skin from wet work and contact with chemical agents but may lead to skin problems if they do not allow the skin to “breathe”. PPE should be assessed before its selection and use. Appropriate barrier creams, together with regular training and the raising of awareness of workers at risk are useful protection measures against the risk of developing dermatitis.

Fragrances and perfumes added to the cleaning product to hide unpleasant smells can be allergens.

The risk assessment should consider the chemical substances that cleaners are exposed to from the matter they are using the chemical product to clean, be this dust, dirt, soot etc., when they clean to remove it from surfaces such as the floor, furniture etc. The chemical ingredients of cleaning products must be considered additionally. Dust can contain different types of particulate matters. The amount of dust and hence the level of risk, depends on the type of cleaning workplace.

BIOLOGICAL HAZARDS

Biological hazards such as bodily fluids are covered by the COSHH regulations. Biological hazards can include viruses and moulds, and exposure is likely to occur when emptying dust collectors and filters.

If dealing with bodily fluids, the risk assessment should cover details such as:

- what equipment is to be used, including PPE
- the disposal method of dirty liquid or material
- any chemicals used to sterilise the contaminated area.

There may be a need of an inoculation policy.

Frequently found problems at stations are bird droppings and Weil's disease from rats urine. HSE advice on these issues is as follows:

Weil's disease from rat's urine:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/healthrisks/hazardous-substances/harmful-micro-organisms/leptospirosis-weils-disease.htm>

Birds droppings:

HSE advice is that:

Good washing facilities should be provided and good occupational hygiene measures should be followed.....when dealing with bird droppings. Common activities, such as cleaning of windowsills, will not result in high exposures to infected material and are not high risk. For larger quantities, use of high pressure water should be avoided to minimise creation of droplets of water containing infected material, but wetting down the work area (using low pressure) will help to prevent inhalation of infected dust, reduce the risk of infection and will also prevent the spread of dust outside the work area. Containing the work area with plastic sheeting should



also be considered. If required, following a risk assessment, for example when larger quantities of droppings are involved, a "P3" or "FFP3" mask should be used. These masks are designed to provide a good level of protection from particles in the air. A supplier of respiratory protective equipment (RPE) can help you choose the correct type of mask. If you need to use this kind of equipment you need to have a "face fit test" which is a test to ensure that the mask fits properly, before it is used. If the mask does not fit properly, it will not provide protection. Overalls should be worn when carrying out this work, and replaced when they are soiled

SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS

Slips, trips and falls are one of the most frequent causes of accidents in the cleaning sector. Accidents can occur from factors such as wet and dirty floor, worn grip of footwear, poor lighting, obstacles in the way, or flooring with too low slip resistance. Flooring with good slip resistance may become slippery when dirty, and this can put cleaners at risk, as it will get wet when mopped.

EQUIPMENT

All equipment should be examined and maintained on a regular basis. In addition, electrical equipment should also be subject to regular testing.

Because cleaning companies are often having to cut corners to remain competitive, they may not provide the correct equipment/ provide heavy equipment/ not maintain machines/ not replace equipment as frequently as they should.

Training should be given on how to use the equipment to ensure it is used safely. Postural and ergonomic factors must also be taken into consideration (depending on whether the individual is tall or short), and how these impact on how the cleaner can do the job. The weight of loads handled by cleaners should also be considered:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/cleaning/backpain.htm>

The weight of loads handled by cleaners is an important risk factor to consider. Research has shown that the heaviest lifting and handling activities were moving furniture and handling floor polishers - but what made the lifting especially problematic was the combination with awkward postures adopted to handle the load. Weights were often lifted in twisted, bent and other awkward postures. Other factors such as the duration, repetition of handling the load, as well as the individual characteristics of the worker also play a role. Vibration (older machines may vibrate more) can reinforce negative effects of other physical strains such as awkward postures, handling heavy loads, repetitive movements etc.

Given that the equipment cleaners use and the ways of working may have been designed for a generic size, mostly likely to be white British (and probably) male workers, musculoskeletal related issues can occur, as cleaner may be working for long periods of time using equipment not designed for their physique.



PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

PPE at work regulations 1992 (PPE Regs)

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1992/2966/contents/made>

as amended by PPE at work regulations 2022

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2022/8/contents/made>

PPE at work, The PPE at work regulations 1992 (as amended) guidance on regs

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/l25.pdf>

PPE refers to any item cleaners might have to wear to protect themselves from hazards such as dust, chemicals, or blood. This should be supplied free of charge. This includes equipment such as gloves, overalls, shoes, boots and masks (the type of PPE required will be determined by the risk assessment).

RMT has received reports of cleaner members buying their own PPE, yet this should be provided free of charge.

There should be regular provision of PPE. Far too often, cleaning companies try to drive down costs by failing to provide uniforms or proper PPE.

PPE should not be a case of "one size fits all". Women often experience problems with ill-fitting PPE that can be uncomfortable and/or risk injury. The PPE Regs require that it should be suitable and capable of fitting the wearer correctly.

Cleaners wearing PPE doing physical work may experience heat stress. Heat stress can be a particular issue for women during pregnancy, also monthly, as the menstrual cycle increases core body temperature, and during menopause, when many women experience hot flushes.

STRESS

HSE Management Standards: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/>

The HSE explain that where there is little or no control on how a job is carried out and where the work is routine, mundane, or done in isolation, that this can cause stress.

HSE also identify relationship with others has a potential for causing workplace stress:

Other staff

RMT cleaner members report of petty management style, with managers who bring cleaners into the office to reprimand them over trivial things. Of course, managers are often under pressure to make the contract work - but unfortunately some of them pass this stress onto those they manage

Passengers

In a recent RMT survey "Violence against women workers on public transport", one RMT cleaner member explained that they had faced "verbal abuse, threat of assault and having glass thrown at me".

Few cleaning companies have a stress prevention policy, not really seeing this as a real h&s problem.



WORK ORGANISATION:

Working patterns

Cleaning work most of the time is outside of the usual daily working periods, either early mornings, evenings, or nights, a pattern of work that can be disruptive to home life. This pattern of work is likely to mean that cleaners are lone working or working unsocial or long hours – and working in isolation to other colleagues. This may lead to a feeling of isolation from colleagues and could impact practically if there is a risk of physical assault from passengers/intruders. In such circumstances, there should be a system to check-in and/or a reporting system.

The impact of lone/isolated work was evident in the results of a recent RMT survey “Violence against women workers on public transport”, which asked “why do you think sexual harassment is becoming more of a problem?” Responses from cleaner grade members included “greedy companies take staff off trains leaving just one, the driver. This leaves everyone open to antisocial behaviour”; another respondent said, “because the trains are not policed”.

Tiredness can contribute towards accidents, as workers are more susceptible to injury when their concentration might be affected.

Financial pressures on cleaners: a recent RMT national survey “Justice for Cleaners” showed that 66% of respondents regularly struggled to make ends meet and 52% had to ask for financial help from friends or family. This financial situation pressurises cleaners to take on more than one job, which will lead to fatigue, as will having to do the commute between jobs. Additionally, the emotional impact of struggling to make ends meet is draining.

Work intensification

The workload in the cleaning sector is intense: there is short staffing and work must be done at a high pace. The outsourcing of cleaning contracts leading to cost cutting, which means that there are fewer cleaning workers do the same amount of work.

This can lead to musculoskeletal ill-health problems amongst cleaners, who report high workloads and time pressures, and difficulty doing a good job in the allocated time. For example, carrying full/heavy rubbish bags long distances; in order to avoid having to carry these many times, means that cleaners may carry all at once. This gets the job done more quickly but adds to the wear and tear on cleaner’s physical health.

There is often lack of coordination between the cleaning company and the client, and the client requires the cleaners to do additional work not mentioned in the contract, and for which cleaners are not prepared, or do not have the necessary tools.

In addition to ergonomic risks, high work intensity – high workload, are all factors associated with the development of musculoskeletal disorders.



OTHER ISSUES:

MESS ROOMS

Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1992/3004/contents/made>

Workplace health, safety and welfare. Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992. Approved Code of Practice and guidance

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/l24.pdf>

RMT receive frequent reports from our cleaner grade members that their mess rooms are dirty and unhygienic. Given this RMT National Cleaners' Charter demands that employers provide "clean and hygienic mess rooms". The health and safety law on this issue is clear:

Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992, Facilities for Rest and Meals, Regulation 25

Suitable and sufficient rest facilities must be provided at readily accessible places.

This should include facilities for eating meals where persons regularly eat meals at work or food is liable to contamination, including that caused by dust, water etc.

Suitable facilities must be provided for any person at work who is a pregnant woman or nursing mother to rest.

Suitable and sufficient facilities shall be provided for persons at work to eat meals where meals are regularly eaten in the workplace.

Eating facilities should include a means for preparing or obtaining a hot drink e.g. kettle or vending machine. Where hot food cannot be obtained either in the workplace or nearby, means for workers to heat their own food should also be provided. (ACOP 229).

Good hygiene standards should be maintained in those parts of rest facilities used for eating or preparing food and drinks. (ACOP 233)

The HSE explain the status of ACOP (Approved Code of Practice) as follows: the HSE have responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to produce ACOPs that supplement the Regulations and provide a minimum standard. The ACOP gives practical advice on how to comply with the law. If this advice is followed, duty holders will be doing enough to comply with the law in respect of those specific matters on which the Code gives advice.



RMT H&S REPS

RMT safety reps can discuss with employers their members' collective and/or individual health and safety problems to get them resolved.

Safety Reps have legal rights in relation to health, safety and welfare, including the right to investigate potential hazards and causes of accidents at the workplace, to investigate employee complaints concerning health, safety and welfare at work and to be involved in workplace risk assessments.

If you are not an RMT safety rep but are interested in finding out more about the role, please contact healthandsafety@rmt.org.uk

If you don't want to become a rep but do want to improve health and safety in your workplace, then please support your local safety rep if you have one; as safety reps have lots of legal rights - but to be successful they need your help and support to make improvements in your workplace.

USEFUL RESOURCES:

HSE advice on cleaning:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/cleaning/index.htm>

TUC advice documents:

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/GenderHS2017.pdf>

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/union-reps/health-safety-and-well-being/women-and-health-and-safety>

RMT Health and Safety Handbook

<https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/publications/health-and-safety-handbook/>

The occupational safety and health of cleaning workers, published by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work:

https://osha.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-03/en_TE8010197EN-N.pdf



For more information on anything in this guide please contact RMT Health and Safety section at: healthandsafety@rmt.org.uk