

Risk assessment - Frequently asked questions

- [1 - What is the difference between hazard and risk?](#)
- [2 - How do I know I have identified all the hazards?](#)
- [3 - How do I know if the risk is serious or not? How do I rate the risk?](#)
- [4 - What should be recorded in the written risk assessment?](#)
- [5 - Am I competent to carry out risk assessment? What does 'competent' mean?](#)
- [6 - When do I need to do a risk assessment?](#)
- [7 - Can I use electronic means of recording my risk assessment?](#)
- [8. Do I have to use the University's forms? What do I do if they don't suit my circumstances?](#)
- [9 - Do I have to transfer all my existing risk assessments onto the new forms?](#)
- [10 - How can I avoid excessive paperwork for one-off or repeated activities?](#)
- [11 - How do I use generic risk assessments?](#)
- [12 - What is an action plan?](#)
- [13 - How do I decide what controls to use?](#)
- [14 - How far do I need to go to control the risks?](#)
- [15 - How do I know if the controls are adequate?](#)
- [16 - How do I make sure the controls are implemented?](#)
- [17 - What do I do if the risk assessment shows that health surveillance might be necessary?](#)
- [18 - What do I do if the controls have to be implemented by others outside my influence?](#)
- [19 - What should be done with a completed risk assessment?](#)
- [20 - How do I tell people about the risk assessment? Who needs to know?](#)
- [21 - How long do I need to keep a risk assessment?](#)
- [22 - When do I need to review my risk assessments?](#)
- [23 - Why do I need to keep a register of risk assessments?](#)
- [24 - What do I need to do if the risk assessment is for a young person?](#)
- [25 - How should I review my risk assessments if I find out that someone is pregnant, or that they are new mothers or breast-feeding?](#)

1 - What is the difference between hazard and risk?

A hazard is defined as the potential to cause harm; risk is the likelihood that harm (illness or injury) will actually occur.

2 - How do I know I have identified all the hazards?

It is normally unreasonable to expect one person to identify all the hazards associated with a particular workplace activity. The joint involvement of supervisors and staff is crucial, as often each individual is aware of different aspects of the task and associated hazards. It is important to have an effective system for identifying existing and emerging hazards. Only focus on the hazards which are likely to give rise to significant risks. This may involve:

- Observations from physical inspections of the workplace, equipment and work practices
- Analysis of how activities are performed
- Drawing up or using checklists to act as a prompt
- Referring to generic risk assessments
- Discussions with your safety advisor or safety coordinator
- Studying accident, incident and near miss reports
- Reference to specific legislation

3 - How do I know if the risk is serious or not? How do I rate the risk?

All risk assessments are subjective to some extent.

However, the University does have a preferred model for risk assessments which should enable all staff to work towards a consistent approach. This model will be used in training courses, and will be used in future by health and safety services to produce their generic risk assessments.

The model refers to other rating systems such as a 5 x 5 matrix, which will give numerical assessments of risk. Please note however that there may be cases where low risks can be further reduced by introducing simple additional measures that are not costly.

4 - What should be recorded in the written risk assessment?

All risk assessments should consider and record the following:

- Identification of the hazards
- Determination of who might be harmed and how
- Description of existing controls, and whether these adequately control the risk
- Description of additional steps to take (if necessary), in the form of an action plan
- Measures to be taken if things go wrong – an emergency action plan
- Date of the assessment
- Signatures of assessor(s) and workers involved.

5 - Am I competent to carry out risk assessment? What does 'competent' mean?

A competent person is someone with the skill, knowledge and practical experience of the work activity under consideration. They may also need training or additional information about legal obligations, or the employer's own system of risk assessment.

The competent person need not be an 'expert' but should be aware of their limitations and when to seek help. Contact health and safety services for details of training in risk assessment.

6 - When do I need to do a risk assessment?

Before the activity commences!

Only by completing the assessment before the activity commences can you be sure to consider all the present or potential risks. Only then can suitable control measures be put in place to make the activity safe, and suitable personal protective equipment (PPE) be selected and provided.

7 - Can I use electronic means of recording my risk assessment?

Both paper and electronic means of recording your assessments are acceptable. What is important is that they are given, and if necessary explained, to those involved in the work or activity. You should also comply with your school arrangements for keeping central records of what risk assessments have been done. Electronic copies have the advantage of the template being available off the web, that information is easily inserted or altered and that they can be made more readily available to those who may wish to inspect or audit your records.

8 - Do I have to use the University's forms? What do I do if they don't suit my circumstances?

You don't have to use the University's forms, but if you do you may find that a lot of the foundation work has been already done for you and that the factors to be considered will already be highlighted. You may also find it easier to respond to requests for documents during audit processes.

You are encouraged to use this format but you may need to tailor it to more readily suit your specific requirements and include information that is more appropriate to the task in hand. You can discuss this with your faculty health and safety manager and the safety advisor from your school or service.

However it is a fundamental requirement to include the following:

- The hazards present and their associated risks.
- The significant risks associated with the work / activity.
- Those persons at risk.
- The control measures identified to remove or reduce risk so far as is practicable, (this may include complying with specific ACOPS or other recognised University procedures.

9 - Do I have to transfer all my existing risk assessments onto the new forms?

Throughout the University there are numerous risk assessment formats and methods of recording the outcome from different methods employed by schools and services.

This situation will increase the likelihood of confusion and consequently errors and incidents. This is a greater problem if a school or services uses multiple formats to assess and control risks associated with the same activity, particularly when people move between faculties or campuses.

It is preferable for auditing and reviewing purposes that risk assessments are in a similar format, as this will greatly reduce the time taken to undertake the task and increase accuracy. It is recommended that a common format of risk assessment is used in each school or service

Where numerous assessments already exist, this transfer may be carried out gradually, following an initial check for duplication of assessments. Where the potential for confusion is identified, these risk assessments must be prioritised for urgent review.

As each assessment is revised and updated, and as new risk assessments are developed, the University risk assessment form should be used wherever possible. This should be completed within a maximum two year time period.

10 - How can I avoid excessive paperwork for one-off or repeated activities?

In some circumstances it is still necessary to carry out a risk assessment, but it may not always be necessary to write down the findings.

For example, a generic risk assessment should be developed for day-to-day activities such as routine manual handling tasks. This particular assessment would take into account typical lifts, the level of training and expertise the individual has, the type of equipment available to them, and length of time and effort involved, any relevant environmental factors such as lighting, steps, etc.

The outcome of such a risk assessment should allow the person to recognise a situation that is beyond their capabilities, and identify when they need assistance, or when a more detailed assessment of the risks is required.

11 - How do I use generic risk assessments?

Generic risk assessments should be used as a starting point for the development of more detailed and specific risk assessments, but can be very helpful for circumstances where the risks are very similar. For example, this could be where repetitive tasks are under taken on a regular basis, for a set of offices or experimental procedures.

They should never be adopted without thinking of how relevant they are to the exact circumstances under consideration, and should be reviewed regularly to ensure they are still relevant.

12 - What is an action plan?

In the context of risk assessment, an action plan defines what should happen to implement the outstanding control measures you have identified in your risk assessment. It will describe what steps need to be taken, by whom, and within what timescale. The person responsible for the risk assessment will use the plan to monitor progress towards adequate control of the risks. For example, the plan might specify a certain level of supervision and monitoring which the principal investigator will need to carry out and record the checks made.

Some action plans will describe a short term programme of work to be carried out before an activity can take place; others may refer to improvements to systems that are basically adequate at the moment, but where there are foreseeable maintenance or upgrades planned over the next few months, or even years.

In a different context, an action plan can refer to emergency situations and describe a contingency plan, or the actions required to deal with situations such as:

- Experiments become super critical
- Chemical spillage
- Fire
- Failure of safety controls
- Significant damage to equipment
- Accident and emergency procedures
- List of authorised people and contact numbers.

13 - How do I decide what controls to use?

The regulations require us to consider types of control in a particular order, called “the hierarchy of controls”. We must start by looking at controls that eliminate the risk altogether (prevention). If we cannot do this, we move on to consider controls that provide collective protection (eg local exhaust ventilation). Only when we have exhausted these options as far as possible, can we move onto controls that protect the individual, such as PPE.

The general principles are:

- Avoid the risk altogether by elimination or substitution
- Evaluate the risks which cannot be avoided
- Put suitable preventative measures in place to control these risks, starting with collective measures before considering personal protective measures
- Give appropriate instruction and training to staff about the risks

14 - How far do I need to go to control the risks?

You need to take such steps so that harm from the work will be unlikely, and any specific legal requirements are met (meaning the risks are adequately controlled).

You must identify all the risks, prioritise them, then control. This means that you have to weigh the costs of controlling the risk against the harm that could result. In other words, where there is a risk of serious injury or death, you need to do more to control that risk than if a minor injury could occur. You may even need to stop the work until you can find a safer way of doing it. This balancing exercise is independent of whether you can afford to control the risks. Otherwise, poorer employers would be able to implement lower standards of protection.

15 - How do I know if the controls are adequate?

For some risks, specific regulations prescribe what you need to do (for example display screen equipment regulations). Complying with these (or with the HSE's approved codes of practice) will ensure adequate control of the risks.

In other cases, there are no specific regulations or approved codes of practice to help us define what is adequate. Here we have to consider things like industry practice, good practice or best practice (this is not necessarily the same as standard or customary practices!). Many industry bodies publish health and safety guidance.

For more assistance, contact the safety advisor in your school or service, your faculty health and safety manager or health and safety services.

16 - How do I make sure the controls are implemented?

This can be done in many ways. The diligence and formality will be governed somewhat by the degree of risk. These checks could take the form of any or all of the following:

- Regular reviews and examination that the identified control measures are being adhered to and that the risk is actually being reduced.
- Use of "permits to work" for high risk activities.
- Regular inspection and monitoring of the activity.
- Individuals being given a copy of the risk assessments.
- Talks, training sessions or research group meetings.
- Suitable and sufficient training to equip staff and students to undertake work activities safely.
- Use of checklists before work commences.
- Use of authorised people (to either sign off a work method or to be present when work is undertaken).
- Suitable degree of supervision
- Spot checks of the activity.
- Investigation of the causes of accidents or incidents and reports of near misses

17 - What do I do if the risk assessment shows that health surveillance might be necessary?

Health surveillance is a legal requirement in certain circumstances. Individuals identified as needing health surveillance must contact the occupational health service who will advise, assist and keep records

18 - What do I do if the controls have to be implemented by others outside my influence?

Where two or more schools or employers share a workplace, each party must co-operate with the others to ensure compliance with relevant health and safety laws. All managers and employers must be informed of any risks to their employees arising out of the undertakings of the other party and the agreement recorded. Control measures that involve others should be coordinated to best effect.

To deal with such situations:

1. Identify the problem and the actions required to control the risks.
2. If the risks have been created by those outside your influence then make sure the other party has considered what control measures are necessary to protect your employees and students
3. Meet to discuss how to implement the control measures
4. Work should not start until the agreed control measures are in place.

19 - What should be done with a completed risk assessment?

You need to make sure everyone who could be affected by the risk is informed about the risk assessment, understands the control measures, and what they need to do to make the controls work effectively. You can do this, for example, by providing them with copies, talking it through in team meeting or tutorials, observing practices and checking that these are consistent with the risk assessment.

Copies of the completed risk assessment should be lodged in the school risk assessment register and kept safely until five or six years after the work has been completed.

20 - How do I tell people about the risk assessment? Who needs to know?

It depends on the circumstances. In the simplest of cases information can be given by word of mouth. More usually it will need to be written down and copies made available. Frequently risk assessments will lead to the production of written 'safe systems of work'. These must be readily available to people engaged in the work.

You need to tell anyone who may be affected by the risks. This includes staff and students, but might also include people like cleaners, estates staff or contractors or carry out maintenance work.

21 - How long do I need to keep a risk assessment?

Most risk assessments should be kept (and kept under review) for as long as they are relevant and relate to a work activity, and then for an additional five or six years. The reason for this is that claims for accidental injury at work can be lodged for up to three years after the injury or effect is diagnosed, which may take some time after the work activity has ceased. Solicitors acting for the injured person and the university will wish to see evidence that the risks were adequately assessed and controlled.

Any assessments involving chemicals that could cause health effects should be kept for 40 years in accordance with the COSHH Regulations.

Assessments for work with genetically modified materials should be kept for 10 years.

22 - When do I need to review my risk assessments?

Risk assessment is not a one-off exercise but an ongoing process. It is a legal requirement that all risk assessments be reviewed and, if necessary, modified in the light of changes which take place.

It is good practice to review all risk assessments once a year (or perhaps once every two years, in low risk situations such as in many administrative departments) whether or not you are aware of significant changes.

However, they should also be reviewed in the light of:

- An adverse incident (such as an accident, near miss, ill health, dangerous occurrence, discovery of a defect)
- A change in the legislation or known good practice
- As the appreciation of hazards and risks develops
- Proposed changes to experimental procedures or conditions (including new methods, new equipment)
- Publication of information about changing risks (such as knowledge that a particular substance has been designated a carcinogen)
- Developments suggest it is no longer valid or can be improved
- Change in personnel: to reflect any change in risk due to the age, experience, sex, disability, susceptibility, physical characteristics of the people working with the risk.
- As a result of health surveillance information
- Monitoring of health and safety arrangements

Risk assessments and the controls applied to the risks must remain relevant to the actual activities taking place, not those assessed many years ago!

23 - Why do I need to keep a register of risk assessments?

The University standard on risk assessment places a responsibility on heads of schools and services to establish and maintain a register of all risk assessments. This particularly applies to risk assessments for activities that do not change daily such as manual handling, work at height and using of particular types of equipment.

It is recognised that maintaining a register of all risk assessments may be impractical for some activities in certain areas such as chemistry and pharmacy, where COSHH risk assessments are undertaken on a daily basis. Under these circumstances it will be acceptable for these documents to be archived locally in a form which is readily accessible.

- The benefits associated with maintaining a register include:
- Consistency of risk control throughout the School/Administrative Directorate through maintaining a library of generic risk assessments
- Undertaking generic risk assessments which may be co-ordinated and shared between individuals, thus reducing an individual's workload
- It avoids the duplication of effort
- Helpful in managing the review process
- It is used to facilitate efficient monitoring and audit work, and help to establish whether risk assessments have been carried out comprehensively across all school activities.

24 - What do I need to do if the risk assessment is for a young person?

Follow the guidance laid down in the University's code of practice and guidance document on young people.

25 - How should I review my risk assessments if I find out that someone is pregnant, or that they are new mothers or breast-feeding?

If a member of staff advises you that they are pregnant then all risk assessments relating to their daily work need to be reviewed and if necessary new assessments produced. In some instances you will need to change control measures or working arrangements to protect the person and unborn child. The assessment should take into account any medical advice received regarding the health of the employee.

Issues that should be considered include:

- Physical risks including movement, posture, confined spaces, manual handling, shocks and vibration, noise, ionising radiation and non-ionising radiation
- Biological and chemical agents
- Working conditions, facilities, working hours, mental and physical fatigue, stress, smoking, temperature, display screen equipment, lone working, working at height, travel, personal protective equipment.

Risk assessments should also be reviewed for new mothers and mothers who are still breast feeding.

Further guidance is available on the HSE website at www.hse.gov.uk