Hazards

GREATER MANCHESTER HAZARDS CENTRE

HEALTH & SAFETY 40 YEARS 2021

FACT SHEET

Act Now

on dust and cancer at work

Silica, wood dust and diesel fumes can cause cancer and lung disease. Here are the questions safety reps can ask to keep them under control.

Not all harmful dust can be seen. The finest particles settle deep in the lungs and can cause cancer, asthma and lasting lung damage years later. This affects builders and maintenance staff, but also workshop teachers, technicians and anyone near building work or running engines.

8,700

cancer deaths a year in Great Britain are estimated to come from past work exposures, says HSE.

500

deaths a year are linked by HSE to silica dust at work.

40%+

of work-related cancer deaths came from construction, in HSE's original estimate.

Three dusts and fumes, all of them harmful

Silica dust

Made when cutting or sanding concrete, brick, stone, tiles, mortar and engineered stone worktops.

Causes silicosis, lung cancer and COPD.

Wood dust

Made by sawing and sanding wood and MDF, as in design and technology workshops and joinery.

Causes asthma. Hardwood dust can cause nose cancer.

Diesel exhaust

From generators, vans, buses and site machinery, especially in enclosed spaces or loading areas.

Causes lung cancer.

Why it goes unnoticed

The most harmful dust is too fine to see. A clean-looking room can still be a dangerous one.

Illness appears many years later, so employers and staff can be slow to link the cause to the job.

In schools and colleges, the risk often comes from contractors, refurbishment and maintenance work close to teaching spaces.

How dust is controlled

- **Remove the task or the material**
- **Use water to damp down dust**
- **Extract dust at the source**
- **Face masks as the last step**

Masks are not the first answer. The law says to control dust at its source before relying on respirators.

Six questions to ask about dust and fumes

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THE KEY POINT

The most harmful dust is the dust you cannot see.

1 What dust is being made?

Silica, wood dust and diesel fumes. Ask to see the COSHH risk assessment.

2 Can the job be done differently?

Avoid the task, or use a way of working that makes less dust.

3 Is dust stopped at source?

Water, on-tool extraction and workshop extraction that is tested and serviced.

4 Is it cleaned up properly?

Industrial vacuums, never dry sweeping or blowing the dust around.

5 Do masks come last?

The right type, properly fitted, and only after other controls are in place.

6 Who checks health?

Exposure measured, lung checks offered, and contractors held to account near staff and pupils.

Keep a record of exposure

If you have worked with dust, note the job, the place, the dates and who else was there. Ask the employer to log it, and tell your GP.

If anyone develops a lung disease or a cancer, tell the union straight away. Early advice protects the right to compensation.

Legal and other standards for prevention and control

- Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH)
- Workplace exposure limits: silica 0.1 mg/m^3; hardwood dust 3 mg/m^3; softwood dust 5 mg/m^3
- Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974
- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
- Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015

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HSE: silicosis and silica
hse.gov.uk/lung-disease/silicosis.htm

HSE: wood dust
hse.gov.uk/woodworking/wooddust.htm

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