



How to manage the risks from airborne contaminants in manufacturing



Managing risks in a furniture company

Van owns a small business that makes furniture. He employs 12 workers who help build tables, shelves, chairs, and cabinets. To build the furniture, Van and his workers often cut, sand and drill wood and use machinery to perform routing, turning, and sawing.



Assess the risk

Van talks with his workers about workplace health and safety regularly to meet his duties as the person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU). By looking around the workshop, Van identified that using the wood turning machines and hand sanding resulted in a lot of wood dusts being released into the air. He also noticed a few of his workers coughing whilst sanding.

Van spoke with his work health and safety (WHS) regulator and learned that wood dusts are hazardous to his workers' health and that he needed to implement a combination of controls to manage the risks of his workers breathing in the dusts. He was also informed that there is a workplace exposure limit for both hard and soft wood dusts, which means that Van (as the PCBU) must ensure that his workers are not exposed to wood dusts above the workplace exposure limit.



Control the risk

To ensure his workers are protected from breathing in dusts, Van implemented a range of control measures. He changed work practices, including using a hand plane rather than electric, to minimise dust generation. He also ensured all processes that generate dusts were fitted with dust extraction systems to collect any dust that is made by the tool.

Van regularly tests the equipment at his workshop to ensure it is in good working order. He checks it for wear and damage and to make sure it's working well, and he replaces filters as required.

To further minimise his workers' exposure to dusts, after consulting with his workers, Van implemented a range of administrative controls. These include:

- implementing shift rotation policies to minimise the time workers spend in an exposure area
- providing a laundry service for dusty workwear
- installing signs to alert workers of hazards of breathing in dusts
- developing housekeeping policies to keep work areas clean and ensure that dusts are not disturbed during clean up.

After implementing these control measures, Van identified that there was still a risk to his workers of breathing in dusts. To minimise this risk further, Van provided appropriate masks for his workers to wear and ensured they were given training and their masks were fit tested by a certified occupational hygienist.

Van regularly monitors his control measures and provides training and supervision to ensure his workers are using them correctly, including fit checking their own mask. Through Van's risk management approach, his workers are protected from the risks of breathing in wood dusts while at work.