

RESEARCH BRIEF

Exposure to multiple hazards among Australian workers

THE ISSUE

We know little about Australian workers' exposure to multiple disease causing hazards in their workplaces.

THE STUDY

This study summarises the findings from the 2008 National Hazard Exposure Worker Surveillance (NHEWS) survey of 4500 workers across Australia. It oversampled workers from the five priority industries for work health and safety under the National OHS Strategy 2002–2012. Workers were asked about their exposure to a number of occupational disease-causing hazards and the provision of control measures. The nine hazards examined in this study were: noise, vibration, airborne hazards, sun, skin contact with chemicals, wet work, biological materials, biomechanical demands and job demands. Eight reports on individual hazards from the NHEWS survey have been published on the Safe Work Australia website. The current study looked at exposure to multiple hazards.

MAIN FINDINGS

Over 60% of workers reported that they were exposed to multiple disease-causing hazards in their workplaces.

On average, workers reported exposure to 2.6 hazards. However, males reported exposure to an average of 3.0 hazards while females reported exposure to 2.1 hazards. Technicians & trades workers and workers in the Agriculture, forestry & fishing industry had the highest average self-reported exposure to hazards, 3.8 and 3.7 hazards respectively. These findings partly reflect that most of the hazards included in the NHEWS survey were hazards found in male dominated, blue collar occupations. The average number of hazard exposures also declined with age.

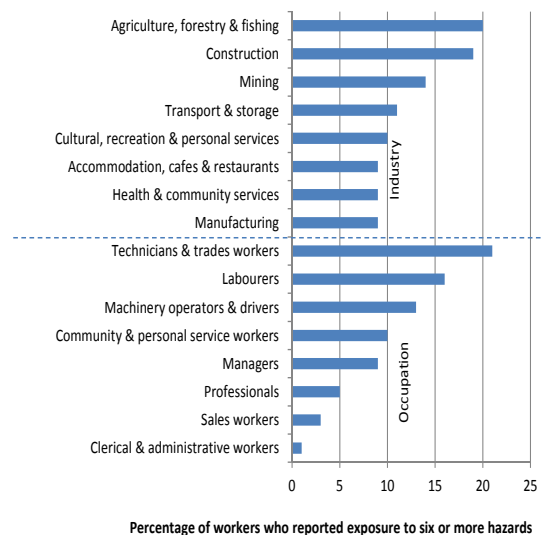
One in ten workers reported exposure to six or more hazards. The proportions of workers with exposure to six of more hazards differed by industry and occupation (Figure 1).

We also looked at co-exposure to noise and vibration and co-exposure to airborne hazards and skin contact with chemicals. For both types of exposures, the likelihood of exposure varied by age, gender, working hours, industry and

occupation. Type of education was a predictor of co-exposure to noise and vibration but not for co-exposure to airborne hazards and chemicals. Workplace size was a predictor of co-exposure to airborne hazards and chemicals.

About 8% of workers with co-exposure to noise and vibration and 4% of workers with co-exposure to airborne hazards and chemicals reported that they were not provided with any control measures for these hazards.

Figure 1. Percentage of workers reporting exposure to six or more hazards in the NHEWS survey by industry and occupation (only top 8 industries presented)



KEY MESSAGES

Self-reported exposure to multiple hazards was common. This highlights the need to consider the whole range of potential hazards in the workplace when conducting risk assessment and risk management activities.

Young workers were more likely to be exposed to multiple disease-causing hazards. Younger workers with higher exposures were not limited to those in lower skilled jobs. This suggests that younger workers may be assigned to tasks with higher exposures as found in other studies and highlights the importance of equipping young workers with the skills and knowledge to protect themselves at work.

An executive summary and the full report from which this brief is drawn from can be found at Safe Work Australia website.