

# MANAGING RISKS WHEN UNPACKING SHIPPING CONTAINERS INFORMATION SHEET

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This Information Sheet provides guidance for workers and supervisors managing risks when unpacking shipping containers.



## What are the hazards?

Hazards associated with unpacking containers include:

- falls from height
- being hit by falling objects
- hazardous chemicals
- being hit by mobile plant
- environmental conditions e.g. heat or cold
- hazardous manual tasks e.g. repetitive strain injuries, and
- slips, trips and falls.



## How serious is the risk?

The consequences of risks associated with unpacking shipping containers include minor sprains, strains, abrasions, fractures and other health problems and in some cases, death.



## How do you control the risks?

Every hazard must be controlled to eliminate or minimise risks to workers' health and safety, so far as is reasonably practicable.

### Siting, stability and placement of containers

Containers should be located and placed to avoid injuries. You should, so far as is reasonably practicable:

- place containers on even ground to ensure the container does not roll over or that the goods shift during unpacking
- place the container within secure premises— if this is not reasonably practicable, place the container away from vehicle traffic and use barriers and signs to restrict access
- ensure there is adequate space around the container for unpacking, and
- ensure the container is not placed under overhead electric lines.

If you cannot do this at your workplace, you should unpack the container at other premises, for example a freight depot.

### Pedestrian and mobile plant separation

Most vehicle incidents result from collisions between pedestrians and vehicles reversing, loading and unloading.

To avoid injuries resulting from being hit by mobile plant like forklifts, side-loaders or cranes you should, so far as is reasonably practicable:

- have clearly defined areas to keep pedestrians separate from mobile plant during the unpacking of containers, and
- implement a driver and pedestrian exclusion zone.

Further information is in the [General guide for workplace traffic management](#).

### Environment

Heat, cold, rain and inadequate lighting and ventilation can create an unsafe working environment leading to injuries.

If unpacking needs to be done in these environments, you should reduce the risk of physical fatigue or other injuries by implementing appropriate controls like:

- fans or heaters for cooling or heating
- additional lighting
- adequate supplies of water to prevent dehydration, and
- wet weather protection.

### Slips, trips and falls

To reduce the risks associated with slips, trips and falls when unpacking containers you should, so far as is reasonably practicable:

- keep the area around containers and pallets clear of obstructions
- ensure floor surfaces are even and undamaged
- clean up spills when they occur and use barricades and signage to prevent access to unsafe areas, and

- ensure workers have non-slip and sturdy footwear.

### Hazardous chemicals

Exposure to hazardous chemicals can present a risk to health and safety. Containers may have residual chemicals like:

- fumigants e.g. methyl bromide and phosphine—these are used to control pests, for example insects and rodents, and
- solvents e.g. formaldehyde—these can be released from transported goods (off-gassing).

You should ask overseas suppliers or importers whether the container has been fumigated. You should also check for warning notices and clearance certificates. If in doubt, assume it has been fumigated and apply appropriate risk control measures.

You should refer to safety data sheets for information on particular chemicals or seek advice from a competent person when developing safe work procedures.

 Further information is in the:

- [Information Sheet: Managing risks of methyl bromide exposure when unpacking shipping containers](#), and
- [Information Sheet: Managing risks of hazardous chemical exposure when unpacking shipping containers](#).

### Hazardous manual tasks


Unpacking goods by hand can lead to musculoskeletal injuries caused by repetitive actions or by working with goods above shoulder height or below knee level.

To eliminate the risk of musculoskeletal injuries forklifts or other mechanical aids should be used. Negotiations may be required with suppliers to make sure goods are provided in bulk containers, palletised or fitted with slip sheets.

To reduce the risk of hazardous manual task injuries you should, so far as is reasonably practicable:

- consider the weight, size and layout of goods and configuration of the storage within the container
- consult with workers to develop and implement a safe method of unpacking

- use powered mobile plant e.g. a forklift, to unpack the container, especially for large, bulky or awkward goods
- use pallet jacks, trolleys or adjustable conveyors to ensure lightweight goods are handled between knee and shoulder height
- consider where the unpacked goods are to be taken so workers don't have to carry them far
- use platform ladders to access lightweight goods at height
- rotate jobs to reduce risk to workers
- ensure workers:
  - are trained to manually unpack goods
  - safely palletise and hand wrap between knee and shoulder height, and
  - wrap and secure palletised loads, e.g. with webbing, before moving the load.

 Further information is in the [Code of Practice: Hazardous manual tasks](#).

### Falling goods


Workers unpacking containers may be struck by falling goods—particularly if goods have shifted during transport or goods spill from the container when first opened. To reduce this risk you should develop a safe method for opening the container and unpacking goods. Procedures could include securing container doors with a short safety rope

so you can see if the goods have shifted when the doors are partially opened.

### Falls from height

To reduce the risk of falls from ladders, cargo, the top of containers, stairs and ramps you should, so far as is reasonably practicable, unpack the container:

- at ground level, or
- using a finger dock or specifically designed mobile platform e.g. a truck loading platform.

 Further information is in the [Code of Practice: Managing the risk of falls at workplaces](#).

### Further information

For further information see the Safe Work Australia website ([www.swa.gov.au](http://www.swa.gov.au)).