



GMB UNION GUIDE

Health risks for cleaners

Cleaners are often the neglected part of the workforce when it comes to health and safety. Many employers make assumptions on how safe cleaning is and in effect leave them to get on with it. Yet cleaners face a range of health and safety problems in their daily working lives. GMB recognises cleaners' problems and with knowledge and experience can help you tackle these issues in the workplace.

GMB continually campaigns for improved pay and conditions, better standards and full compliance with government regulations for the cleaning industry. GMB has a track record of tackling cases where conditions for cleaners are below legal requirements. This leaflet looks at the health and safety risks of cleaning work and what can be done to address them. If you have any concerns about health and safety at work, GMB can provide you with advice, support and assistance.



MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES AND RISK ASSESSMENT

Your employer has clear health and safety responsibilities under the law.

There should be a health and safety policy which should detail who is responsible for the supervision of workers health, safety and welfare. A competent person should be appointed to carry out risk assessments. These should establish as safe a system of work possible by looking at the hazards encountered every day and looking to eliminate them.

As elimination is not always possible measures should be introduced to reduce their effect to the lowest level possible. GMB can help educate safety reps to challenge inadequate risk assessments on your behalf.

Management also have an obligation to ensure that any health and safety instructions or training is given in an understandable way. This might mean producing advice in other languages or using pictures to explain hazardous situations.



USING CHEMICALS

Perhaps the most obvious hazard that cleaners encounter is exposure to cleaning chemicals. All chemicals supplied by the employer should have clear instructions on how they should be used, where they should be used and if there is a need to wear any protective clothing, such as gloves or an overall.

Chemical use is covered by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (often abbreviated to COSHH). Data relating to any chemical used, including its disposal, should be given to operatives. Training in the correct use of chemicals, particularly when being used for the first time is an important part of the COSHH regulations.

BODILY FLUIDS

Biological Hazards such as bodily fluids are also covered by the COSHH regulations. A clear procedure needs to be established when dealing with body fluids which might include faeces, vomit or blood.

This should detail any chemicals to be used to sterilise the contaminated area, what equipment is to be used, including personal protection and the disposal method of dirty liquid or material. If the contaminated material comes under the description of clinical waste there will be special disposal measures to be followed. If there is the possibility of contracting an infectious disease then there will be a need to establish an inoculation policy for greater protection.

LONE WORKING

By its very nature a cleaning job may mean working in isolation from your colleagues, particularly where the work has to be done in large buildings often with many floors.

There should be a system established, initially at supervisory level, where regular checks are carried out on operatives. Where a worker is in a building alone without supervision then some form of communication or reporting system needs to be put in place.

As lone workers are more vulnerable there may be the possibility of physical assault from intruders, as such a regular checking in system should be established with a supervisor or central controller.

UNSOCIAL / LONG HOURS

Cleaning is often carried out at times when the regular occupants of the building are not present. This can often mean early starts and / or late finishes, particularly if there is a need to do more than one job due to low wages or reduced hours per job.

Tiredness can contribute towards accidents as workers are more susceptible to injury when their concentration might be affected. These situations need to be taken into account by employers and GMB has experience in negotiating in many similar situations.

SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS

Slippery surfaces, uneven flooring, bad light and unmarked cables are just some of the trip hazards cleaners can encounter every working day. Warning signs and cones should be used where floors may be wet and slippery. Uneven floors should be reported and the faults rectified.

Bad lighting can usually be fixed by increasing the wattage of the light source and cables should be bundled and if possible safely hidden or clearly marked. Where cleaning has to be done at height, a risk assessment should be used to identify the type of equipment that has to be used so that the job can be done safely.

CLEANING EQUIPMENT

Due to the cleaning industry often having to undergo tendering for competitive contracts, the equipment is often old and potentially dangerous. All equipment should be examined and maintained on a regular basis. In addition electrical equipment should also be subject to regular testing, this is known as Portable Appliance Testing (PAT) and the testing should be recorded.

Older machines may vibrate more than they were originally designed to do potentially causing muscle and nerve problems. Again these machines should be maintained on a regular basis and disposed of when their effective working life is over.

STRESS

Stress is not just a problem for those with managerial roles. It is acknowledged that where there is little or no control on how a job is carried out, where work is routine, mundane or done in isolation then stress can be a major problem. The HSE have established management standards to help deal with stress in the workplace. GMB have experience of dealing with these standards and can approach management to help set up mechanisms to tackle stress related issues.



PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

Personal protective equipment refers to any item a worker might have to wear to protect themselves from hazards such as dust, chemicals or blood. Cleaners would normally expect to be supplied, free of charge, with protective equipment such as gloves, overalls, shoes and masks. The type of equipment required will be determined by the risk assessment.

GMB SAFETY REPS

GMB safety reps are given access to both training and materials when they are elected. This means that they can often approach management on collective or individual problems in an attempt to get them resolved.

They also often have access to information through GMB which the employer may not be aware of.

GMB HEALTH AND SAFETY REPRESENTATIVE CHECKLIST:



	Yes	No
Have adequate risk assessments been carried out in your workplace?	[]	[]
Is it clear where managerial responsibility lies for health & safety?	[]	[]
Is full information available on all chemicals in use?	[]	[]
Are you supplied with suitable and sufficient PPE?	[]	[]
Is there a viable working alone policy in place?	[]	[]
Is equipment checked and maintained on a regular basis?	[]	[]
Are the HSE management standards on stress applied?	[]	[]
Have GMB safety reps been involved in carrying out risk assessments?	[]	[]

YOU'RE SAFER AND HEALTHIER IN THE GMB

GMB is proud of its focus on workplace health and safety. Will Thorne founded GMB in 1889 in part because of the terrible working environment he experienced, and we will always fight to improve conditions and provide protection for GMB members.

It's been an established fact for more than 25 years that trade unions make the workplace safer. Time after time, research has shown that the presence of trade union Safety Representatives identify hazards and resolve issues before they can cause harm, and reduce exposures to substances that may damage health.

To back up our Representatives the GMB has a network of health and safety specialists in our Regions. The GMB also has a National Health and Safety Department that is widely acknowledged to offer amongst the best health and safety service of any trade union.

It has been proved many times that workplaces with active Safety Representatives have half as many major and serious injuries as workplaces without them – in other words you're safer and healthier in the GMB.



WHEN INCIDENTS OCCUR AT WORK - UNIONLINE

Report all accidents, incidents and attacks to your employer and get it recorded in the accident book.

Make sure you also tell your GMB Safety Rep and GMB Workplace Organiser, they will make sure that your employer acts to stop anyone else being hurt in the same way.

ROLE OF GMB SAFETY REPRESENTATIVES

GMB Safety Reps have rights on health, safety and welfare issues over and above their fellow workers. They have the right:

- To **INVESTIGATE** potential hazards and causes of accidents at the workplace.
- To **INVESTIGATE** employee complaints concerning health, safety and welfare at work.
- To **MAKE REPRESENTATIONS** to the employer on any health and safety matter in the workplace.
- To **INSPECT** the workplace on a quarterly basis.
- To **INSPECT** the workplace after a reportable accident, dangerous occurrence or reportable disease.
- To **VIEW** documents relating to health and safety in the workplace.
- To **REPRESENT** employees in consultation with HSE inspectors and to receive information from them.
- To **ATTEND** safety committee meeting.
- To **TIME OFF** for **HEALTH & SAFETY** training.
- To **PAID TIME OFF** to carry out all of the above functions.

You could also contact UnionLine on **0300 333 0303** to trigger the process to make a claim against your employer to get compensation. As a GMB member you are covered against the cost of lawyers and court cases or tribunals that may be necessary to get justice for you.

