

Pinnacle Pointers for Safety Group Programs

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10 Steps to Improved Hand Safety at the Worksite

The hand consists of 27 bones, including the eight bones of the wrist. When the other associated structures (i.e., nerves, arteries, veins, muscles, tendons, ligaments, joint cartilage and fingernails) are considered, the risk for a variety of injuries is high when trauma involves the hand.

So it should come as no surprise that more than 1 million U.S. workers are treated in emergency departments annually for acute hand and finger injuries, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates that approximately 110,000 workers with hand and finger injuries lose days from work every year – second only to back strain and sprain in work days lost.

Step One: Control hazards

Remove any hazards you can with engineering or job controls. Your organization can modify equipment, change work practices and purchase new tools or other devices to reduce hazards. For example, build a barrier between a hazard and your employees (i.e., an engineering control) or change the way employees perform their work (i.e., an administrative control). These changes can reduce physical demands, eliminate unnecessary movements, lower injury rates and reduce workers' compensation costs and employee turnover.

Step 2: Upgrade equipment

Outdated equipment can increase the danger of a hazard. Assess your workplace equipment with the help of a safety expert to determine whether upgrades or updates could help prevent injuries. For example, substitute open blade knives with rounded-end box cutters that don't directly expose employees' hands to blades.

Step 3: Reengineer equipment

Engineering or administrative controls should be considered first when seeking to eliminate workplace hazards. For example, install two-handed safety control interlocks and light curtains to auto-stop equipment to improve hand protection.

Step 4: Train your employees

Safety training demonstrates your organization's commitment to workplace safety and encourages a company-wide culture of safety.

Think outside the box when it comes to hand safety training. During its hand safety training, U.S. Steel asked employees to perform simple daily tasks, like opening a jar of peanut butter or putting on a work shirt, without using their fingers or hands. This drove home the consequences of unsafe work habits on the job.

Make training an ongoing conversation between your employees and safety leaders. Consider holding quarterly safety workshops or sending around monthly safety newsletters to help keep hand safety top of mind.

Step 5: Enforce policies and procedures

Safety training does little good if policies and procedures aren't enforced. Be sure to develop safety rules and procedures aimed at preventing hand injuries. For example, require cut gloves when using knives, or require that cutting blades be inspected and sharpened regularly.

Step 6: Provide adequate PPE

Chances are, you've heard it before: Personal protective equipment (PPE) should be your last line of defense against workplace hand injuries. However, the BLS reports that 70 percent of workplace hand injuries occur because workers aren't wearing gloves at the time of their injuries.

In addition to training employees on how gloves can save their digits, consider trying new gloves that better meet their needs. Bulkiness, sweating hands and lack of grip are common complaints workers cite when explaining why they choose not to wear cut-resistant gloves, for example.

Today's gloves are lighter, more comfortable, more breathable and safer than ever. For example, ultra-high molecular weight polyethylene (UHMWPE) is 15 times stronger than steel and offers level 5 cut protection. New materials like UHMWPE feel cool, comfortable and lightweight, while providing resistance to cuts, abrasions, chemicals, water, humidity and UV light.

Step 7: Highlight danger zones

Identify hazardous areas such as pinch points by color coding and warning stickers to enhance employees' awareness and reduce the number of hand and fingers injuries. Understand, though, that frequent use of equipment and weather conditions can cause warning paints and stickers to disappear, so reapplying may be required.

Step 8: Consider banning jewelry

Thousands of people are injured every year when a ring, bracelet or other piece of jewelry gets caught in machinery or pinch points. Consider disallowing rings and jewelry while workers perform potentially hazardous tasks. Many energy companies, for example, have developed policies and procedures that ban wearing jewelry on working oil and gas fields.

Step 9: Select the right tools

Selecting appropriate hand tools is crucial to preventing hand and finger injuries. The wrong tool, or using the right tool in the wrong way, can result in a serious hand and finger injury. Conduct regular hand tool inspections and hand tool instruction, where practicable. Ban tools such as adjustable wrenches that tend to slip and raise the chances of hand and finger injuries.

Step 10: Evaluate and revise

In a recent article, safety consultant Joseph Werbicki said, "The only thing that we possibly can find of value in accidents is what we can learn from them. Are operating procedures in need of change? Is training adequate? Are there uncorrected unsafe conditions or unsafe behaviors? Accident investigations are a must if we want to identify the root causes of accidents and prevent their recurrence."

Pinnacol offers numerous resources that support timely, thorough accident investigations. Pinnacol's Safety Services team can help you review your organization's safety successes and failures, determine what's driving them, and revise your safety strategy as needed.

Like all safety goals, achieving zero hand injuries in the workplace takes a commitment. By following these 10 steps, your enterprise will be well on its way to improved safety, and your workforce will be safer and more productive.

Pinnacol and other resources

For information and standards that can improve your organization's sun safety, visit the [OSHA](#), [CDC](#) and [National Safety Council](#) websites. For additional support, visit Pinnacol's [Resources](#) webpages. Or call Pinnacol's Safety On Call hotline at 303-361-4700 or 888-501-4752. Our Safety Services team stands ready to answer questions and help keep your workforce safe and on the job.

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