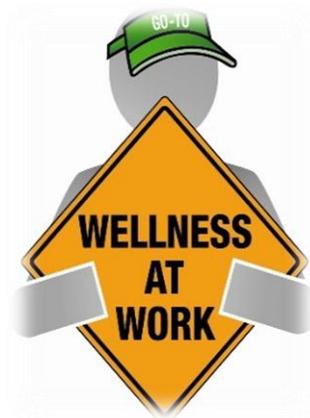




Promoting safety and health at work

Occupational safety and health (OSH), also commonly referred to as occupational health and safety (OHS) or workplace health and safety (WHS) is an area concerned with the safety, health and welfare of people engaged in work or employment. However, OSH or OHS can also apply to students in a classroom or at University, volunteers, customers of a business or even a visitor, since at any time the health of these individuals can be compromised by activities within a workplace. Realising the importance of the health and safety of these groups Guyana has enacted its Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1997 to protect these workers, with the responsible agency being the former Ministry of Labour, now the Ministry of Social Protection.



According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the World Bank (2014), three hundred and seventeen million (317,000,000) accidents occur on the job annually. These occupational accidents and work-related diseases result in approximately six thousand three hundred (6,300) deaths per day and account for 4% of the GDP. For developing countries in the Caribbean and Latin American this would have amounted US \$226.2 billion in 2013 alone. Additionally, since numerous work-related accidents go unreported in many countries, it is believed these figures may be higher.

In Guyana, the Ministry of Labour recorded twelve (12) fatalities and seven hundred and thirty eight (738) industrial accidents during the year of 2012 and ten (10) fatalities and five hundred and thirty (530) accidents in 2013 with the highest incidences being in mining, forestry and agriculture; all of which are the country's main economic activities.

Workplace Hazards

While work provides us with a number of economic and other benefits, we are usually exposed to a number of physical, chemical and biological factors that can adversely affect our health, regardless of our jobs. Let's assess a few of the risk workers in various fields might be vulnerable to.

Agriculture

This sector employs a larger amount of workers, whether in rice or sugar production or forestry and fisheries. Workers in this class are most likely to be exposed to physical risk factors from operating machinery like tractors and combines and also prolonged exposure to the sun. They are also exposed to biological factors like parasites and pest which can transmit disease and harmful infections. The use of fertilisers and pesticides is another health risk factor which can result in skin cancers and birth defects.

Construction

This sector is one of the most dangerous, causing more occupational fatalities than any other sector in both the United States and in the European Union. With a growing economy like Guyana the country has seen a boom in the construction industry, which provides an ever changing landscape of the country's urban and rural areas. Workers see physical injuries occurring from falls and use of tools and chemical injuries as a result of inhaling gas, smoke and other fumes.

Mining

In the extraction sector workers are exposed to a number of risk factors which are detrimental to their health. Recently the number of fatalities seen in this sectors is worrying. Miners are exposed to harmful chemicals such as mercury and can suffer numerous injuries resulting from the use of power equipment and a caved in pit. Miners are also exposed to disease vectors such as mosquitoes which transmit such diseases as malaria and dengue.

What can be done

The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1997 emphasises the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) which can help protect against many of these hazards. It is recommended that *agriculture workers* use Knapsack sprayers when applying chemicals like fertilisers and pesticide. These should also be used in the correct ways. When applying chemicals, workers must wear protective clothing like goggles to cover the eyes and overalls to protect the skin. Spraying should be done in the same direction of the wind and attention must be paid to the correct usage of every chemicals. Long exposure in the sun should be avoided as much as possible or keep hydrated and apply sunscreen. Only operate machinery if fully trained or supervised under the recommended conditions.

For *construction workers* it is advised that helmets should be worn at all times on the construction sites. Protective clothing and gears like gloves should be worn when handling specific equipment. Proper safety equipment such as harnesses and guardrails and procedures such



as securing ladders and inspecting scaffolding can limit the risk of occupational injuries in the construction industry.

For *miners* the use of rubber boots, gloves, and goggles are all recommended since this can protect against cuts and punctures and prevent slips and falls. The use of a retort in small scale mining is also recommended which will help to reduce mercury emission during the amalgam distillation process (burning of gold). Further, miners are now being encouraged to make use of mercury-free technologies that are becoming available.

Most important in preventing accidents in the workplace is education. Workers need to know how to use equipment, where to use it and under what conditions it should be used. It is also advised that gears and equipment are properly labelled, installed and serviced when required. Proper signage should be placed around the workplace or site indicating warning and other preventative measures.

While the goal of OSH programs is to foster a safe and healthy work environment for all, it is important to point out that promoting occupational health and safety in any work environment will also safeguard the quality of the environment especially in operations where harmful chemicals have to be used.



We therefore encourage workers and managers alike to ensure that safety in the workplace is given priority to preserve their health and the environment.

Share your ideas and questions by sending letters to: “Our Earth, Our Environment”, C/O EIT Division, Environmental Protection Agency, Ganges Street, Sophia, GEORGETOWN, or email us at: eit.epaguyana@gmail.com.