

Prioritize Hazards for Control

Now that you've identified hazards in your workplace, set priorities so you can focus on the biggest risks. You'll use your prioritized list to work on the next safety and health program element, Hazard Prevention and Control. Make sure to keep your list up to date: hazards and risks change along with changes in work processes.

To-Do

- Compile a list of hazards you've identified.
- Ask workers which tasks or situations they consider the most dangerous.
- Address serious hazards right away.
- Rank hazards according to severity, likelihood, and number exposed.
- Fix easily corrected hazards if possible.
- Keep your list of hazards and their associated risks up to date.

Compile your lists of hazards

Put together your lists of hazards from worker input, inspections, and other sources of information (Hazard Identification, Worksheets 1–4). Now it's time to prioritize.

We all know what it's like to have to prioritize a long list of to-do's. You might feel the same way about your hazard list. Even if it's short, you probably won't be able to fully address all hazards right away.

Pro Tip

Consider tackling hazards that are easy to fix right away to give your team a sense of accomplishment and momentum. For example:

- Clean up and organize cluttered work areas
- Move furniture, materials, or equipment that might be blocking the way for someone needing to leave (or safely get at a hard-to-reach area)
- Move chemicals into their proper storage areas
- Shut down and stop using a machine that is not operating properly
- Postpone a planned activity that presents a safety concern

Keep in mind, though, that sometimes a hazard that seem simple to fix actually points to a bigger problem. Ask why the hazard exists. For example, you can quickly move a electrical wire that it is a tripping hazards out of the way, but to solve the problem you may need better-placed electrical outlets.

Assess the risks and prioritize

To start, ask your workers which hazards pose the greatest risk. For example, you can give workers or safety champions the list and ask them to choose the top three hazards. See if any patterns emerge. Ask workers about the reasoning behind their choices—why did they choose the ones they did?

Then, with involvement of workers, consider these factors for each hazard:

- **Severity.** If this hazard leads to an incident, how serious might the resulting injury or illness be?
- **Likelihood.** How likely is an incident to occur? This could be influenced by how often an activity is done, how often workers are exposed, and how close workers are to the hazard. Keep in mind that a serious risk can be unlikely but have catastrophic results (see the “Low-Likelihood Incidents Can Still Be High Risk” box).
- **Number of workers.** How many workers are exposed to the hazard?

Low-Likelihood Incidents Can Still Be High Risk

Safety efforts often focus on common and repetitive tasks. These tend to produce most of the cases on the OSHA log. Maintenance jobs can be “off the radar,”—especially if they don’t happen often—because health and safety professionals are not as familiar with them.

Consider this example from a manufacturing assembly plant. A freight elevator stopped working during the night shift, so a maintenance worker climbed a fixed ladder on the side of the elevator to get to the top. Lighting was poor due to a burned-out lightbulb and there was no guard rail system. After unjamming the safety gate, the worker tried to get on the fixed ladder again to climb down. But he missed it, due to the poor lighting, and fell about 15 feet to his death.

People responsible for overseeing safety in the plant were not familiar with this task and the conditions the worker faced. The risk might have been considered low because the task was not done often—yet the severity of potential injuries was high. Be sure to consult with workers to learn about less-frequent tasks and conditions that could lead to catastrophic outcomes.

Use the table on the next page to rank each hazard. If you need to, get outside help from your OSHA field office or [OSHA’s On-Site Consultation Program](#).

Give the highest priority to those ranking high in severity and likelihood and/or that affect the most workers. Put prevention and control measures in place for hazards that present the greatest risk first.

There’s no need to list every hazard. You don’t need to include hazards you can address immediately. Focus on opportunities to improve safety and health, especially for hazards that make workers feel unsafe.

Remember that employers have an ongoing obligation to control all serious, recognized hazards and protect workers. Be sure to take immediate action to address any *serious hazards*. OSHA defines a serious hazard as a situation where “there is a substantial probability that death or serious physical harm could result.” In the example below, you should address the hazard immediately even if it involves only a couple of workers.

Hazard	Severity (high, medium, low)	Likelihood (high, medium, low)	Number of workers exposed	Priority for action (high, medium, low)
Example: Unguarded mechanical power press (risk of amputation)	H	M	1–2	H
Example: Unguarded mechanical power press (risk from flying particles)	M	H	1–2	H
Example: Unguarded mechanical power press (risk from noise)	M	H	1–2	H

You will use your prioritized list of hazards when you begin identifying, choosing, and implementing measures to prevent and control hazards. You’ll also use it when you train workers to recognize risks.

Remember that identifying hazards is not a one-time activity. The workplace constantly changes and new hazards arise. Before making changes in the workplace, find out how they’ll affect health and safety—and address those impacts. Update your list of hazards as you inspect the workplace and seek worker input about conditions.