

## Cleaning

**Chemicals.** Paid work as a cleaner usually means a double dose of hazards for many women who have the job of unpaid cleaner at home. Little research has been carried out in this area and particular concerns surround the double exposure to cleaning chemicals.

Chemicals can be particularly hazardous for **pregnant workers**. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 place special duties on an employer to carry out risk assessments in relation to women workers of childbearing age.

### **Musculoskeletal disorders (“aches and pains”) and vibration**

An HSE report published in 1999 had surveyed 5000 cleaners and found 52% of the cleaners had sought medical advice for aches and pains – mainly in elbows, knees, right wrist and hand, lower back, neck and right shoulder. There was also evidence of potential hand/arm vibration syndrome.

**Lone Working.** Cleaning work is often carried out alone outside office hours, either early in the morning or late in the evening, thus putting the worker at increased risk of violent attacks.

**Stress and fatigue** can also be an issue for cleaners, particularly those who do this work on top of another full time job. Cleaners often have no control over the size of their workload and are subject to time pressures to complete their work, with poor training.

**Needlestick injuries.** Hospital cleaning presents a real risk of contracting infections such as Hepatitis B from carelessly disposed of needles/syringes

See next page for **Hazards of Cleaning Work** and **Action Checklist**

### **Some Relevant Law**

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999  
The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992  
Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992  
Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002  
Controlled Waste Regulations 1992 (re clinical waste)

### **Some Further reading**

**T & G** Leaflet: *Do you suffer from aches and pains in silence?*

**TUC** leaflets: *Chemical Safety* and *Look after your skin*

**HSE** leaflets: *Blood borne viruses in the workplace. INDG342* - Free  
*Health risks from hand-arm vibration INDG126* - Free  
*Preventing slips, trips and falls at work INDG225* - Free  
*Working alone in safety INDG73(rev)* - Free

Labour Research Department Booklet: *Hazardous Substances at Work – a Safety Reps' Guide* £4.25

### **Hazards of Cleaning Work**

- Chemicals - many cleaning agents contain hazardous chemicals such as chlorine, ammonia, caustic soda and detergent. Some can cause skin problems such as dermatitis others can cause breathing difficulties and lung problems if used in a poorly ventilated area. Chemicals can cause fire and explosions, and pollution. Exposure to chemicals may cause reproductive and genetic problems.
- Manual Handling - lifting and carrying vacuum cleaners up stairs, carrying buckets of water and moving furniture can cause back and other injuries and postural problems.
- Wet floors - can cause slips.
- Cleaning equipment – some equipment, eg buffing machines, can cause repetitive injuries. Vibrating cleaning equipment can cause hand arm vibration syndrome. Poorly maintained electrical equipment can present a risk of electric shock.
- Stretching to clean high surfaces may cause musculo-skeletal injuries.
- Working at height presents a risk of falls.
- Exposure to biological hazards, such as human excreta, blood and body fluid or dog faeces leads to risk of infection.
- Lone working, particularly early in the morning or late at night increases risk of violence/assaults

### **Action check list**

1. Have COSHH assessments been carried out on cleaning chemicals?
2. Are procedures in place to ensure that cleaning chemicals are not mixed together? Are the cleaning chemicals clearly labelled to identify hazards? Has the safety rep been able to obtain the safety data sheets?
3. Are workers provided with adequate protective clothing e.g. overalls and protective gloves?
4. Have manual handling risk assessments been carried out? Are workers trained in safe lifting techniques?
5. Is all equipment provided suitable and easy to handle?
6. Is electrical cleaning equipment maintained?
7. Is low vibration cleaning equipment purchased?
8. Has the employer reduced the risk of RSI?
9. Are cleaners provided with safe, well maintained equipment, e.g. stepladders, that allows them to clean high surfaces without stretching?
10. Are cleaners who may be exposed to biohazards made aware of the risk and vaccinated against infectious diseases where possible? Are there policies for safe disposal of syringes and also for using safer syringes?
11. Are there procedures to ensure safety of cleaners who work alone? If the workplace is isolated/has poor public transport links and cleaning is outside normal hours does the employer provide transport to and from the workplace?

### **Pregnancy Hazards:**

Chemicals, pesticides, biological hazards, violent assaults, work at height, standing, stress, fatigue, awkward movements, vibration, and heavy, repetitive work.