

## Safety and health risks in HORECA

The hotel, restaurant and catering (HORECA) sector is a major part of the European economy. It is an important job creator both in the service sector and in the economy as a whole in many EU Member States. Indeed, about 7.8 million people were employed in this sector in 2004, which accounts for 4% of total employment in the EU25.

Working conditions in the sector are difficult and include irregular, often constraining work hours, atypical forms of employment, comparatively low pay and lack of job stability. And these conditions put workers' health and safety at risk. However, the incidence rate in the HORECA sector (3041 accidents per 100 000 workers) for accidents with more than 3 days absence from work, is comparable to the rest of the economy (3176 accidents per 100 000 workers)<sup>i</sup>.

Analysis of the French national statistics for the HORECA sector show two major problems: falls on the same level (30% of occupational injuries in the sector) and manual handling operations (28% of occupational injuries and classed as [occupational diseases](#)). These two problems are closely related to workplace design and layout, but also to work practices and organisation.

### Legislation

Workers are protected by Directive 89/391/EU. The directive's basic principle is risk prevention. It requires employers to carry out risk assessments and also imposes a general duty on them to ensure the health and safety of their employees at work.

The framework directive is supplemented by individual directives; for example, the European Working Time Directive, the Workplace Directive 89/654/EC or the Noise Directive 2003/10/EC.

### The risks of the working environment

The growing HORECA sector covers a wide range of businesses including hotels, pubs and restaurants, contract caterers, fast- food takeaways, cafes and bistros.

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<sup>i</sup> European Statistics on Accidents at Work (ESAW, Eurostat 2004)



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The risks across the sector are many and varied. A dishwasher or cook in a restaurant, a chambermaid in a hotel or a barman in a club can face very different hazards at work.

One feature of the sector is the heavy workload. Work is often urgent and done at peak hours. It demands great concentration, requires constant contact with frequently 'difficult' customers and can be highly stressful. In some cases, stress is related to the monotony of the job and boredom. A lack of training can also lead to stress. The other risk factors include violence, harassment (from customers, colleagues and employers) and discrimination (to women and people from foreign countries).

Great flexibility is demanded of workers, which can disturb the balance between their working and private lives. Peak hours for HORECA businesses are also the times when most people are not working, so long and irregular working hours in the evening, at night and over weekends are commonplace.

The following risk factors can be identified:

- noise (kitchen, discotheque, night club, cafe etc);
- subdued lighting (possible consequences: falls, burns, eye injuries etc);
- air temperature and quality (sudden temperature variations, exposure to steam, toxic substances and gasses, poor air quality etc);
- physical workload (prolonged standing, constant movements, raising of loads such as beds, furniture, merchandise etc);
- skin complaints and infections due to frequent contact with water, food, cleaning products etc;
- new equipment and technologies (kitchen equipment, making reservations via the internet, air conditioning etc), incorrect operation, mechanical jobs, repetitive and unvarying work etc;
- tobacco and alcohol (easy access);
- stress caused by the heavy workload;
- contact with sharp objects and hot products, repetitive use of stairways or lifts, night travel to and from home, violence, harassment etc.

Working short periods in a job seems to increase risk. Moreover, workers whose status is precarious, such as students, temporary workers and less able-bodied persons, are often victims of serious injuries. Vulnerable workers need special attention and, in fact, are not permitted to do some jobs.



## Safety and health risks in HORECA

### What are the various types of injuries reported?

Various types of occupational injuries are identified in the HORECA sector:

- injuries resulting from carrying or handling loads
- slips and falls
- injuries caused by using manually operated machinery
- injuries resulting from falling objects
- exposure to or contact with harmful substances
- cuts from knives and sharp objects
- burns.

The kitchen and bar are among the most dangerous workplaces.

The most frequent complaints in the HORECA sector are of a musculoskeletal, dermatological or respiratory nature.

### Focus on most common risks:

#### Slips, trips and falls on wet or contaminated floors

People working in kitchens and serving food are more likely to be injured through slips and trips than by anything else.

The vast majority of slip injuries happen on floors that are wet or contaminated, whether by food debris, cooking oil or other spillages.

- Most slip injuries happen on wet floors.
- Most trips are due to poor housekeeping.
- Plan ahead to deal with any such problems during busy periods when the pace of work increases.



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### **Case study: 16-year-old employee flash fries arm in 360°F oil following slip**

A 16-year-old girl was employed at a fast-food outlet to cook fries at a frying range. She slipped on water leaking from an ice-making machine and instinctively put out her hand to break her fall. Unfortunately her hand went into the deep fat fryer containing oil at a temperature of 360°F and she sustained severe burns to her left hand and forearm.

The outlet was short-staffed on the day of accident and the team leader was working on the tills instead of monitoring workplace safety.

Although company policy was to mop up spillages it was common practice to leave spillages at busy times and cover them with a sheet of cardboard, which itself can create a tripping hazard. It was also usual to give greater priority to serving customers than to cleaning spillages.

Following the accident, the company undertook a review of its management of wet or contaminated floors.

- Slip control was given priority over serving customers.
- Systems were put in place to ensure maintenance of faulty equipment.
- Managers were identified as having responsibility to ensure slips procedures were implemented and followed.
- Employees were given responsibility to deal with slips as a priority and given backing by company.
- Extra training on slips procedures was given to all staff.

### **Manual handling/musculoskeletal injuries**

Back pain and other aches arising from manual handling injuries are the most common type of occupational ill health in most European countries.

In the HORECA sector there are many tasks that, without proper controls, can cause back pain or upper limb injuries that can affect the hands, wrists, shoulders and neck.

Lifting and carrying heavy items or pushing and pulling can be a major source of back pain, while forceful or repetitive activities and poor posture are linked to upper limb injuries.



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### **Good practice example: risk mapping of repetitive movements in hotel room cleaning services, Italy**

A study to identify upper limb overload-related risks from repetitive movements in occupational situations was started in 2000 and improved in 2005. A checklist is the tool used for gathering the information necessary to 'risk mapping': an Excel file arranged to collect data and process it.

The checklist was made up of five parts related to the study of the four key factors — lack of recovery time, frequency of the action, use of physical strength and awkward posture — and of the complementary factors — vibrations, low temperatures, precision works and counterstrokes. Daily cleaning activity was distinguished from periodic deep cleaning, which, generally speaking, is considered more tiring.

The single tasks performed by the cleaning staff and the specific percentage of time to get them performed within the work shift were analysed.

The results were summarised in a manual<sup>2</sup> supplied with software and addressed to prevention experts, job organisation experts, workers' safety representatives and those in charge of the prevention and protection services. The aim was to tackle and manage the risks related to upper limb repetitive movements.

The manual was released nationally and used to detect and measure the occurrence of such risks within several hotels.

### **Exposure to or contact with harmful substances**

Many types of hazardous cleaning chemicals are used in the HORECA sector, including washing-up liquids, dishwasher detergents and rinse aids, drain cleaning products, oven cleaners, disinfectants, toilet cleaners, bleach, sanitisers and descalers. The most common risks are contact with the skin or eyes, and breathing in or swallowing.

<sup>ii</sup> "La valutazione e la gestione del rischio da movimenti e sforzi ripetuti degli arti superiori -Analisi organizzative, indici di esposizione OCRA, schemi di intervento, principi di riprogettazione", D.Colombini, E.Occhipinti, A.Grieco - EPM Unità di ricerca della "Ergonomia della Postura e del Movimento" - Franco Angeli Editore 2000



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Many cleaning chemicals are hazardous because they are corrosive and can cause skin and eye burns if splashed onto the body.

Without proper controls, some may cause dermatitis (dry, sore, flaky skin) or other skin irritations, asthma and breathing problems.

Other causes of dermatitis in the HORECA sector are contact with foods — juices from fruit and vegetables, proteins in fish, shellfish, meat and flour) — and water — while washing-up and washing food — soaps and cleaning products.

### **Case study: use of bleach in a fast-food takeaway**

An employee poured bleach into an empty spray bottle. A reaction occurred with unknown remains in the bottle, causing the bleach to spurt out of the bottle into the eyes of another employee.

#### *Control measures*

Train staff on the use and handling of cleaning chemicals, including giving instructions not to mix different chemicals and ensure that all containers and spray bottles are clearly labelled with their contents. Provide information on first aid procedures and what to do in the event of accidental spillages. Provide protective gloves for use when handling.

## Conclusion

Health and safety in the HORECA sector deserves greater attention. While there is awareness of the risk of injuries arising from work, there seems to be limited focus put on the risks caused by combined exposure to physical demands and a high pace of work. A better understanding of the long-term health consequences of working in hotels and restaurants would be welcome.

Addressing concerns about salaries, physical working conditions and health concerns are key issues. Ensuring that working conditions also improve in the sector's huge number of small businesses is a real challenge and may require new, innovative approaches.



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### Further information

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