

Stress at Work

Why is stress increasing?

Causes of increased work-related stress include

- work overload
- job insecurity
- poor work organisation
- lack of control over our work.

What is the responsibility of employers?

Employers must

- consult with employees and OHS representatives
- provide adequate and appropriate information, training, instruction and supervision
- identify, assess and control hazards, including organisational structures and behaviours that may cause stress
- provide an appropriate physical and organisational environment
- provide healthy and safe workplaces and work systems, including a working environment where the risk of stress is eliminated or minimised.

Organising to prevent injury and disease that results from stress

Workers should

- meet to discuss causes, effects and possible solutions to injury and disease caused by stress – see *Stop Stress at Work: A Union Guide for Workers*, available from the ACTU OHS Unit
- collectively determine how to achieve a healthy and safe workplace.

Your health and safety representative and committee, or your union delegate, should be involved.

Health and safety representatives and union delegates should

- ensure that all workers know that they have the right to refuse work likely to endanger them

- collect evidence of the problem – for example, talk to workers, do a survey, keep records of incidents
- meet with the employer
- seek control of hazards at source
- develop a prevention policy in consultation with workers and management
- include measures for prevention of stress in enterprise agreements
- contact the union or OHS inspectors if necessary.

Workers and their representatives and management should jointly develop stress prevention policies that

- recognise that stress arises from the poor or inefficient organisation of work
- acknowledge that stress is preventable
- identify the key factors that contribute to work-related stress
- outline procedures to enable workers to raise their concerns
- include processes for ongoing review and evaluation.

What causes stress?

Do causes of stress in your workplace include

- lack of control over work
- communication difficulties between workers and management
- bullying, harassment or intimidation
- work overload
- job insecurity
- workplace restructuring and reorganisation
- inadequate staff and resources
- unresolved health and safety issues, for example, exposure to chemicals, bullying or noise
- excessive performance monitoring and surveillance
- insufficient training
- dangerously long hours
- difficulties dealing with clients or the general public?

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Why is stress an issue in the workplace?

Chronic or prolonged stress, which results in physical and biochemical changes over long periods, affects workers' health.

Chronic stress can lead to an increase of cholesterol and fats in the arteries, which is a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

The psychological effects of prolonged stress may include loss of concentration, confidence and motivation, and feelings of frustration, anxiety and anger.

Chronic stress can lead to depression.

In extreme cases, work-related stress could lead to suicide.

Chronic stress can cause or worsen a range of ill-health problems.

Over the long term, prolonged exposure to stress has been linked to serious illnesses, including

- diabetes
- heart disease
- suppression of the immune system cells involved in fighting cancer.

Where stress levels are high, injuries are also high, as

- working conditions that cause stress can also cause injury
- overwork, pressure or lack of support make workers more vulnerable to injuries.