

Lower limits save lives - WHS Ministers must protect workers from toxic and cancer-causing chemicals

We, the undersigned organisations who represent worker and public health urge Work Health and Safety Ministers to immediately adopt these more protective levels.

- Every worker has the right to a safe and healthy working environment.
- Exposure to chemicals is a significant contributor to work-related illness, injury, disease and death in Australia. Hundreds of thousands of workers are exposed to these chemicals every day at work.
- Safe Work Australia has undertaken a lengthy, rigorous and comprehensive review of exposure limits and is recommending lower levels for some of our most toxic and highly used chemicals.
- Many of these chemicals are highly toxic and are known causes of cancer. These limits have been delayed now for more than 5 years.
- It is time to immediately lower these limits and save lives.

Background:

In October 2019 WHS Ministers recognised the significant harm caused by workplace hazardous substances and agreed to review the levels at which workers could be exposed. These levels, called workplace exposure standards, are designed to protect nearly all workers from adverse health effects, both acute and chronic - e.g. burns, nerve damage, cancer, lung damage, respiratory disease, damage to reproductive health.

Over 600 chemicals were reviewed and initial findings published during 2019-2022.

Work on the methodology or decision-making process commenced in 2015. Multiple sources of information were evaluated for each chemical and a recommendation, for each chemical, was then open to scrutiny through public consultation and stakeholder feedback.

In 2022, following this rigorous, expert and independent analysis of the chemicals, Safe Work Australia recommended changes for about a third of the chemicals.¹ Despite this comprehensive consultation some employer and industry representatives raised

¹ [Changes to Workplace Exposure Limits](#)

concerns with the proposed health-based levels and sought additional opportunities to provide information on some chemicals. WHS Ministers agreed to the recommended level for all but nine toxic chemicals.² The nine include three cancer causing agents³ and three acutely toxic substances.⁴

In 2023, Ministers requested further assessment of these chemicals by Safe Work Australia which led to the third round of public and targeted requests to industry and worksites for more information and health evidence. Additional technical and practical information, such as measurability of the levels, was evaluated. As a result of this further assessment and consultation Safe Work Australia is again recommending to lower worker exposure limits for these nine chemicals.

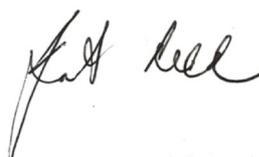
These recommendations have now been reviewed by the Office of Impact Analysis (OIA) and a Decision Regulatory Impact Statement (DRIS) has been sent to Ministers for final decision.

More than a decade after this process commenced, Safe Work Australia's recommendations (option 2 in the Decision Regulatory Impact Statement) reflects the best available scientific, medical and practical evidence available.

It is essential that chemical exposure is reduced to as low as reasonably practicable to protect workers and minimise their risk of chemical poisoning or developing cancers, respiratory disease, and other long-latency diseases.



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² Benzene, chlorine, copper, formaldehyde, hydrogen cyanide, hydrogen sulphide, nitrogen dioxide, respirable crystalline silica, and titanium dioxide.

³ Benzene, formaldehyde and respirable crystalline silica. Recent work has implicated benzene in lung cancer as well as acute myeloid leukaemia. [Vermeulen, R et al, Environmental Health Perspectives-132 (12) Dec 2024]. Cole K, Carey RN, Driscoll T. The future burden of silicosis and lung cancer among tunnel construction workers in Queensland. Ann Work Expo Health. 2025 Dec 15;69(9):917-926. doi: 10.1093/annweh/wxaf013

⁴ Chlorine, hydrogen sulphide and hydrogen cyanide.



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