

Safety Management Systems

Guide to assessing risk >

Employers are required under Workplace Health and Safety legislation to identify, assess and control hazards and risks in their workplace. This information bulletin outlines one method that employers can use to complete this assessment to assess risks in their workplace and to prioritise the necessary actions they should take.

What are you trying to do?

Where a hazard has been identified, there is a need to assess the level of risk associated with it. Risk is a function of how likely an accident is to happen and how bad the outcome could be. Assessing the severity will enable the risks to be prioritised so that action can be taken to prevent accidents from happening.

There are many techniques for carrying out risk assessments ranging from complex techniques such as fault tree analysis and reliability studies through to using simple tables such as the one in this bulletin. Given the needs of most employers, the method shown in this bulletin is suitable for most situations and provides a structured way of assessing risks to reduce the level of individual subjectivity.

The Risk Table method given below is one of a variety of similar methods based on the same principle. You may wish to investigate other methods to assess their suitability for your organisation.

Remember, there are two important laws of human nature, which should always be taken into account when deciding on outcomes. Firstly, never rely solely on common sense as it is much less common than is generally assumed. Second, always rely on Sod's law "If someone can do it – sooner or later someone will".

Further details on the requirement to identify hazards and assessing risks can be found in Regulation 38 of the [Workplace Health and Safety Regulations](#). This regulation also outlines requirement to keep records of all assessments carried out. This is generally for 5 years after the last review or 30 years in regard to exposure to a hazardous substance.

How to use the risk table

The assessment is carried out in three steps. For each hazard –

1) Determine the most likely worst outcome from exposure to the hazard

Ask the question, "Realistically, what is the worst likely outcome?" Select from one of the following outcomes:

Outcome	Description
Fatal	may cause death, either immediately or after the event
Major injury or illness, permanent disability	may cause serious injury or illness, normally irreversible, or such that the person is unable to return to the same type or work e.g., amputation
Minor injury or illness	normally reversible effects, e.g. minor broken bones, hospital admission, several days of lost time
Negligible injury	May cause nil or minor injury or illness, e.g., cuts, abrasions, sprains, bruises, first aid treatment, < 1 day lost time.

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2) Determine what is the likelihood of the event occurring

Next ask the question, “How likely is it that someone will be exposed to the hazard?” select the most appropriate answer from the list below:

Likelihood / probability	Description
Very Likely	Occurs repeatedly, expected to happen, happens all the time.
Likely	Will occur several times, not surprised if it happened.
Possible	Could occur sometimes.
Unlikely	Unlikely to occur, but conceivable, has been known to happen in the past somewhere.
Very Unlikely	So unlikely that the probability is close to zero. If the likelihood is determined to be very unlikely, double check the assessment, as in reality this does not occur very often.

When determining the likelihood you need to take into account any control measures that are already in place.

3) Determine the Risk

For simplicity, the risk is assessed into one of 4 priority groups which helps identify the necessary action that you should take. They are:

Very High	meaning there is imminent danger – stop work
High	serious danger – action immediately
Medium	moderate danger – action as soon as possible
Low	minor to negligible danger – further action to be scheduled. Look for ways for continual improvement

Using the table below and the values selected above, determine the level of risk associated with the particular situation, event or activity.

OUTCOME	LIKELIHOOD				
	Very Likely	Likely	Possible	Unlikely	Very Unlikely
Fatal	Very High	High	High	Medium	Low
Major Injury	High	High	Medium	Low	Low
Minor	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	Low
Negligible Injury	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low

NT WorkSafe >

**GPO Box 1722
Darwin NT 0801**

Telephone: 1800 019 115
Facsimile: (08) 8999 5141

Email: ntworksafe@nt.gov.au
Website: worksafe.nt.gov.au