



Work uniforms

The right uniform can improve worker safety, comfort and productivity. But the wrong choice can create health and safety hazards.

Here are some key health and safety issues workers need to consider when it comes to uniforms:

Material selection

Materials can be natural, like cotton, wool or linen. They can also be synthetic, like polyester, spandex or nylon. Some fabrics are blends of natural and synthetic materials. The type of fibres and how they are woven together will affect the material's characteristics.

When selecting uniform material, keep these characteristics in mind:

- **Breathability:** To prevent overheating, choose fabrics that allow air circulation, like cotton, polyester blends and moisture-wicking materials. Uniforms with layers that can be added or removed based on temperature are also helpful.
- **Durability:** For high-contact or abrasive environments, select materials that withstand wear and tear. Suitable heavy-duty fabrics include denim and canvas.
- **Ease of cleaning:** To keep uniforms clean and workers healthy, choose materials that are easy to wash and maintain. Uniforms should withstand frequent washing without wearing out. Fabrics that require dry-cleaning add extra cost and time for workers.

Protection from heat and flame

There are two types of material that provide protection from heat and flame: flame-resistant and flame-retardant materials.

Flame-resistant materials naturally resist catching fire and don't melt or drip when exposed directly to extreme heat. Wool is an example of a flame-resistant material.

Flame-retardant materials are materials that would burn under natural circumstances but have been treated with chemicals to resist catching fire. Many of these chemicals can be harmful and should be avoided. If fire is a concern, ask for flammability test results.

When choosing flame-resistant or flame-retardant uniforms, look for materials that comply with relevant safety standards, such as the National Fire Protection Association standard for flame-resistant clothing, NFPA 2112. Weave type can also affect flame resistance.

Workers who may encounter fire in the workplace should be provided with flame-resistant uniforms.

Protection from other hazards

- **Chemical resistance:** For workers handling hazardous chemicals, select uniforms made from materials that resist chemical penetration and degradation.
- **Cut resistance:** In industries using sharp tools or materials, provide cut-resistant uniforms or accessories like gloves or sleeves to prevent injuries.
- **Weather protection:** Ensure uniforms provide adequate protection against weather conditions, including waterproof materials for wet environments and insulated clothing for cold climates.

Fit and comfort (ergonomics)

Ensure uniforms fit well to prevent restricted movement or discomfort, but avoid overly loose clothing, as it can increase the risk of burns. Ill-fitting uniforms can lead to musculoskeletal issues and hinder performance. Designs should offer flexibility and ease of movement. Stretch fabrics or ergonomic designs reduce strain and improve comfort.

Visibility

In environments with poor lighting or where visibility is crucial, like construction sites and road work, use high-visibility clothing with reflective strips. Depending on the situation, the Canadian Standards Association standard for high-visibility safety apparel, CSA Z96:22, may apply.

Accessories

Uniforms should consider the type of footwear needed for the job. Footwear should offer support, slip resistance, protection and comfort. It should also stay on in case of an accident or incident. Uniforms should also be compatible with any necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) like gloves, helmets or face shields.

Testing

Before launching new or redesigned uniforms, employers should have workers field-test them in all possible working conditions, including having the uniform cleaned. This ensures the uniforms are appropriate and saves employers from buying ineffective uniforms that need to be replaced.

The role of workers and the union

To keep workers healthy and safe, unions should use the workplace health and safety committee or representative to push for consultations on uniforms, provide ongoing feedback on uniform performance and report any uniform-related health and safety issues.

In certain situations, uniforms are considered a form of PPE. Workplaces in sectors like health care, emergency services, energy, municipalities and transportation often require uniforms with protective features.

When employers choose a mandatory uniform designed to protect workers from hazards, they should consult the health and safety committee or representative to ensure the uniform is appropriate to the work and environment.

If a worker has concerns that their uniform does not meet health and safety standards, they should immediately raise the issue with their supervisor and notify the health and safety committee or representative.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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