

Safe use of knives in the meat and food industry

This information sheet provides advice about how to use knives safely. It is for employers and employees in the meat and food industry.

November 2009

The most common type of injury in the meat industry is cuts to the non-knife hand or arm. Although cuts can occur on both hands as some employees swap hands while cutting. Other common injuries include:

- cuts to the hand holding the knife that occur when the hand slips off the handle (eg run-through injuries)
- cuts that occur with a reverse grip while pulling back towards the body
- inadvertent cuts to another person where people are working too close (eg left handers working close to right handers)
- sprains or strains (eg from the extra effort required to use knives that are not sharp enough).

Choosing a knife

Cuts and sprain and strain injuries can be reduced by using a well-designed and sharp knife. See table below for recommended safety features.

If employees use their own knives, employers must check they are well designed, sharp and have adequate safety features as outlined in table.

<p>To stop the hand slipping down the knife look for:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ an easy to clean non-slip handle ▪ anti-slip guard.
<p>To enable a cut to be made with less exertion, look for:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a blade suitable for the task that is sharp ▪ the smallest blade that can be used to complete the task (so less pressure is required).
<p>To ease hand or wrist strain, look for a handle that:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ has been shaped to reduce excessive bending of the wrist ▪ is the right size for the hand – the handle needs to be large enough in diameter to reduce the tendency for an excessively tight grip (consider that workers wear cut-resistant gloves on the knife hand) but not overly large for an inadequate grip.

Knife sharpening

Knives with a dull or blunt edge contribute to the risk of cuts and sprains and strains, especially where the work requires many cuts to be made each day. Knives should be sharpened as often as required; the frequency will depend on the use and contact with objects.

Sharpening machines are generally a reliable way to keep knives consistently sharp. Workplaces with sharpening machines must ensure their employees are trained how to use them and follow the manufacturer's instructions for the specific sharpening machine.

Manual knife sharpening is a difficult skill to learn and should be done with caution. Where manual knife sharpening is carried out, employers must ensure employees are fully trained by competent people and training records are maintained.

Note: Worn knives should be disposed of appropriately (eg this may mean having a securely sealed container with a 'letter box' type slot to put the knives through. This container can then be collected by an approved scrap collection service). This will reduce the risk of cleaners cutting themselves on knives put in rubbish bins.

Training

Employees should only use knives after they have been thoroughly trained and competence tested (keep records). In particular, employees should be given instruction on:

- using and selecting the most suitable knife for the job
- keeping knives in good condition (eg handle clean and blade sharp)
- holding the knife correctly (eg grip should be firm but not excessively tight)
- sharpening a knife
- correct cutting methods
- using knives near employees

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- techniques of cutting towards the body where this type of cut is unavoidable
- putting knives away (eg in a scabbard) when they are not being used.

Employees, particularly young workers and those new to the workplace, should be adequately supervised. Employers/supervisors should closely monitor employees' work practices, correct any unsafe work habits and be available to answer questions.

Personal protective clothing

As a minimum, cut-resistant gloves must be worn on the knife hand and a mesh gauntlet (or a combination of a mesh glove and arm guard) on the non-knife hand. Mesh aprons must be worn where the blade passes across the abdomen or comes towards the body.

Safety tips when working with knives

A change in job design, such as reducing the frequency and duration of the cutting task by job rotation for example, may assist in reducing the risk of injury.

Maintain enough room between people so the person using a knife won't be bumped or inadvertently slip and cut someone else (left handers should not work beside right handers).

A knife must not be used to transfer meat by piercing and levering.

Cutting should be done at a height that is ergonomically safe.

Ensure cutting surfaces (eg tables, boards) are clear and uncluttered and don't have a build-up of product.

Keep floors clean and free of obstacles to avoid slips, trips and falls. Wear appropriate non-slip safety footwear and ensure tread is not worn.

Ensure lighting provides good visibility. Avoid working in low lighting, shadows, glare or bright reflections of badly positioned lights as these can create work hazards.

Do exercises – wrist stretches before work and during breaks can reduce the risk of strains and sprains

Do not grip the knife all day, place in scabbard as often as possible to release hand pressure and avoid cramp (especially learners). Always place knives in a scabbard when not in use, do not store on wall fittings or locker shelves

Do not wipe soiled blades on clothing.

Always be aware of the non-knife hand position before placing blade onto product.

Use designated stoning benches to sharpen knives, not sinks or handheld. Never walk and steel a knife.

Make sure suitable first aid arrangements are in place (eg first aid kit fully stocked, all employees know who the first aiders are etc).

Further Information

For information about your legal responsibilities and practical advice about suitable risk controls to improve health and safety at your workplace, contact your local state or territory authorities.

Victoria

WorkSafe Victoria – 1800 136 089
or visit worksafe.vic.gov.au

NSW

WorkCover NSW – 13 10 50
or visit workcover.nsw.gov.au

Northern Territory

NT WorkSafe – 1800 019 115
or visit worksafe.nt.gov.au

Queensland

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland –
1300 369 915 or visit worksafe.qld.gov.au

South Australia

SafeWork SA – 1300 365 255
or visit safework.sa.gov.au

Tasmania

Workplace Standards Tasmania –
1300 366 322 or visit wst.tas.gov.au

Western Australia

WorkSafe WA – 1300 307 877
or visit commerce.wa.gov.au/worksafe

Useful resources

Knife maintenance, safety and hygiene DVD, National Meat Industry Training Advisory Council mintrac.com.au

OHS Reference Guide Australian Meat Industry CD,
Meat and Livestock Australia mla.com.au