



The risks of working alone

Hazard awareness is key to staying safe while working solo.

Modern workers have more flexibility than ever before. The rise of independent contracting, for example, means that many people are getting the job done with minimal in-person supervision or interaction with others.

“But working alone presents hazards that are often overlooked,” says Jasmine Kalsi, IHSA’s Occupational Hygienist. “Those hazards must be addressed to ensure the safety of workers.”

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) defines working alone as a situation where a person is working independently and cannot be seen or heard by another. Being out of touch with others puts solo workers in greater danger if they suffer an injury or experience a medical emergency. Help may simply not arrive in time.

A careful risk assessment must therefore be conducted for all tasks that a lone worker might perform, whether they’re an independent contractor or an employee of a larger company.

The assessment should clearly identify hazards, the potential for harm, and existing control measures. It requires asking questions such as: How often has an incident occurred? How bad could things get if something goes wrong? And if that happens, what immediate steps should be taken?

This chart outlines some common hazards of working alone, as well as their risks.

What’s the hazard?	What’s the risk?
Physical work tasks	Certain tasks are more physically demanding when done alone. For example, lifting a too-heavy object may cause a musculoskeletal injury.
Health crisis	Solo workers with pre-existing health concerns such as epilepsy, heart conditions, or severe allergies may not receive timely medical care in the event of an incident.
Environmental stressors	The symptoms of heat stress, hypothermia, and toxic inhalation are more difficult to recognize in oneself, due to their gradual onset and the mental impairment that they can cause.
Natural disasters	Help may not be immediately available in the event of a fire, flash flood, or other environmental emergency.
Violence and harassment	Lone workers—particularly those in client-facing roles—are more vulnerable to aggressive or threatening behaviour by others, who may be emboldened by a lack of witnesses to report their actions.
Driving	Particularly on rural roads, it may be more difficult to access help in the event of a vehicle breakdown or crash (or simply getting lost). Solo drivers can also be more susceptible to fatigue.
Social isolation	Lack of regular interaction can trigger feelings of alienation and disconnection, which can affect overall mental well-being.
Stress	The pressure of managing tasks alone can increase anxiety and potentially lead to poor decision making.
Limited access to resources and support	Lone workers may not have access to the same resources, tools, or technology available in a team or on-site setting, making it more difficult to do their work safely.
Lack of work-life balance	Lone workers who do not set clear boundaries for work-life balance are at risk of decreased job satisfaction, injury (due to fatigue), and burnout.

Control measures

The most important way to reduce potential risks to lone workers is to have a comprehensive safety and emergency response plan in place. Other control measures include:

- **Regular check-ins:** Create a detailed procedure for communication between lone workers and supervisors, including defined times for safety check-ins, plus regular meetings to discuss progress, address concerns, and provide necessary support. If a worker will be in a remote location, ensure they are given a communication device that will function properly in that environment (e.g., a high-frequency radio or satellite phone).
- **The buddy system:** Nominate a colleague who the lone worker can contact at any time during the duration of their work shift, or set up an automated system the worker can use to check in and out of their work activities.
- **Policies and training:** Have workplace policies in place that outline expectations and responsibilities for lone workers, their supervisors, and the employer. Provide hazard-recognition, emergency management, and first aid training for all affected workers.

It's important to note, too, that some tasks should never be undertaken by anyone working on their own. These include work being done in confined spaces or in a trench, as well as any work involving toxic chemicals or high-voltage electricity.

Many people enjoy working alone and are productive doing it. But the risks of solo work cannot be ignored—especially when that work is in the high-risk sectors that IHSA serves. Before working alone, always assess and understand the hazards at the jobsite and know how to manage them to ensure safety.



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