

# Worker Safety in Waste Management



Waste management is an essential service across Canada, supporting public health, environmental protection, and community wellbeing. However, for workers in waste collection, recycling, and processing facilities, the job comes with a wide range of occupational hazards. For OHS managers and HR directors, implementing strong safety practices is critical to reducing injuries, minimizing exposure to hazardous materials, and ensuring regulatory compliance.

Workers in the waste management industry face several types of accidents and injuries. One of the most common risks are musculoskeletal injuries caused by repetitive lifting, pushing, and pulling of heavy bins or materials. Improper lifting techniques or overexertion can lead to strains, sprains, and chronic back injuries. Workers are also at risk of being struck by moving vehicles, including collection trucks, forklifts, or other mobile equipment, particularly in busy city environments or confined waste processing sites.

## Waste Management Hazards

Sharp objects present a significant hazard. Improperly disposed materials such as broken glass, metal scraps, or needles can cause cuts and puncture wounds. These injuries are especially concerning due to the potential for exposure to infectious diseases. Slips, trips, and falls are also common,

often caused by wet surfaces, loose debris, or uneven terrain at disposal sites and transfer stations.

In addition to physical injuries, waste workers face exposure to biological and chemical hazards. Biohazard risks include contact with bacteria, viruses, and fungi found in household waste, medical waste, or organic materials. This can lead to infections, respiratory issues, or skin conditions. Workers may also encounter hazardous chemicals, including cleaning agents, solvents, or improperly discarded industrial substances, which can cause burns, poisoning, or long-term health issues.

## **Harm Prevention and Safe Work Procedures**

Preventing harm in the waste management industry requires a combination of engineering controls, administrative measures, and proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE). PPE is essential and should be selected based on the specific tasks and hazards present. At a minimum, workers should wear cut-resistant gloves, steel-toe boots with slip-resistant soles, high-visibility clothing, and protective eyewear. In environments with airborne contaminants or dust, respiratory protection may be required. For handling potentially infectious materials, additional protection such as disposable gloves, coveralls, and face shields may be necessary.

Safe work practices are equally important. Workers should be trained in proper lifting techniques and encouraged to use mechanical aids, such as bin lifters or carts, whenever possible. Clear traffic management plans can help reduce the risk of vehicle-related incidents, including designated pedestrian zones and backup alarm systems. Regular housekeeping at waste facilities, such as removing debris and maintaining clean walkways, can significantly reduce slip and trip hazards.

# **Fatigue**

Managing fatigue is another key component of worker safety. Waste collection is physically demanding, often involving early morning shifts and repetitive tasks. Workers should be encouraged to take regular breaks to prevent overexertion and maintain alertness. While specific break schedules may vary depending on provincial regulations and organizational policies, a general best practice is to provide short breaks every 1–2 hours during physically intensive work, along with longer rest periods during extended shifts.

# **Biohazards**

Biohazard exposure can be minimized through proper hygiene and handling procedures. Workers should avoid direct contact with waste whenever possible and use tools instead of hands to handle materials. Handwashing facilities or sanitizing stations should be readily available, and workers should be trained to wash hands thoroughly before eating, drinking, or touching their face. Vaccinations, such as those for hepatitis A and B or tetanus, may also be recommended for workers in high-risk roles.

# **Geographically Specific Concerns**

Across Canada, waste workers should remain vigilant for region-specific hazards. In colder climates, icy conditions increase the risk of slips and falls, while extreme heat during summer months can lead to heat stress or dehydration. Wildlife encounters, such as with rodents, raccoons, or insects, may also pose risks, particularly in rural or landfill settings. Additionally, the improper disposal of items like lithium-ion batteries has become an emerging hazard, as these can ignite and cause fires in collection vehicles or facilities.

Protecting workers in the waste management industry requires a proactive and comprehensive approach. By prioritizing hazard awareness, enforcing PPE use, promoting safe work practices, and addressing both physical and biological risks, OHS managers and HR directors can create safer work environments. Strong training programs, regular inspections, and continuous improvement efforts will help ensure that workers remain protected while performing this vital service.