

Says OSHA Director Jukka Takala: "Safe maintenance is vital to prevent accidents at work. We are very proud that Cefic is helping us to reach the workplaces and get our main messages across."

Good practices in safe maintenance are promoted through a variety of campaign activities including conferences, seminars and training sessions for workers, employees and other stakeholders involved in maintenance work. Many campaign events are focused around the European Weeks for Safety and Health at Work in October 2010 and 2011 (calendar week 43).

Regular maintenance is essential to keep equipment and machines in good working order, and to ensure a safe work environment. Lack of or inadequate maintenance can lead to dangerous situations, accidents and health problems caused by a range of issues from leaking of hazardous substances due to flawed gaskets or corroded pipes, faulty electrical installations and corroded lifting equipment, to poorly lit work areas, and badly marked traffic routes, for example.

At the same time, maintenance itself is a high-risk activity with a number of hazards resulting from the nature of the work. Risks lie in a wide range of areas such as high pressure vessels and hot surfaces, intoxication by heavy gases while maintaining subsurface equipment, working in confined spaces, working alongside a running process, and being in close contact with machinery.

Risk is also heightened because the activity involves changing tasks and working environment, which is especially true for subcontracted maintenance work. Working under time-pressure is also typical for maintenance operations, especially when shutdowns or high-priority repairs are involved.

OSHA estimates that in Europe up to 20% of all workplace accidents are connected with maintenance and in a number of sectors over half of all accidents are maintenance-related.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) was set up in 1996 in Bilbao, Spain. Its mission is to "make Europe a safer, healthier and more productive place to work". EU-OSHA was established by the European Union to improve the lives of people at work by stimulating the flow of technical, scientific and economic information between all those involved in occupational safety and health issues. At the national level, it is represented through a network of focal points, which are usually the lead OSH bodies in the individual Member States.
Further information:
<http://osha.europa.eu>

Five basic rules for safe maintenance

1. Planning

Maintenance starts with proper planning, a process that employees need to be involved in. Issues at this stage include the scope of the task (what needs to be done, and how it will affect other activities in the workplace), the assessment of hazards and the identification of risk measurement measures and the time and resources that the activity will require.

2. Making the work area safe

The work area needs to be secured by preventing unauthorized access and by keeping it clean and safe with power locked-off, moving parts of machinery secured, temporary ventilation installed, and safe routes established for workers to enter and exit the work area.

3. Using appropriate equipment

Workers need to have the right tools including personal protective equipment.

4. Working as planned

Safe work procedures have to be communicated, understood by workers and supervisors and applied correctly. The work should be monitored so that the agreed safe systems of work and site rules are observed. Procedures need to be in place for unexpected events.

5. Making final checks

The maintenance process needs to end with checks to make sure that the task has been completed, that the item under maintenance is in a safe condition, and that all wastes have been cleaned away. The final step involves completing a report including comments on any difficulties that have been encountered, together with recommendations for improvement.