

HEALTH AND SAFETY

THE LAW

Being safety conscious at work is not just a matter of common sense, it is actually a legal requirement. Health and safety at work is overseen by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and there are specific laws that govern what you must – and must not – do. There are also regulations that cover specific risks such as manual handling and noise.

In simple terms these laws say that everyone – employers, employees and people who are self-employed – have to take all reasonable steps to make sure that the working environment is as safe as possible for everyone concerned.

The first step is to decide if you are an employer, an employee or are self-employed.

An **employer** is someone who has people working for them, a boss. If you run a business that employs staff such as a nightclub or record shop you are classed as an employer, and as such must make proper arrangements for the health, safety and welfare of your staff and anyone else who might be affected by your work. This means doing things like identifying hazards, assessing risks, training staff and, if you have more than five paid or unpaid staff, preparing a written health & safety policy document.

An **employee** is someone who is paid a regular wage for doing their job. Most people in regular jobs such as office work or retail are employees, but some musicians – orchestral players and holiday entertainers for example – are also classed as employees. As an employee, you have to take care of yourself and other people who might be affected by your work and co-operate with the health & safety arrangements made by your employer.

Self-employed people (sometimes called **freelancers**) are paid a fee to provide a specific service and usually work in different places or for different customers. Much of the work in the music industry is done by self-employed people doing things like playing gigs in pubs, DJ-ing in clubs, producing records or giving music lessons. If you do any freelance music work – even if it isn't your full-time job – you have to observe the health & safety laws. Like an employee, you must take care of yourself and other people who might be affected by your work, and you must also do some things that are done for employees by their employer – for example you have to make sure that you get proper training and, importantly, you have to do your own risk assessments.

RISK ASSESSMENT

What is a risk assessment?

A risk assessment is simply an examination of the things in your work that could cause harm. The aim is to make sure no one gets hurt or becomes ill, by assessing whether the existing precautions are enough or if you need to do more. If you are an employer or self-employed you must, by law, do a risk assessment for every place you work in.

How to assess the risks in your workplace

You are looking at hazards and risks.

A **hazard** is anything that can cause harm.

A **risk** is the chance, high or low, that someone will actually be harmed by the hazard.

For example, playing the electric guitar is hazardous because electricity can be harmful. As long as the equipment is set up and working properly, though, the actual risk of injury is very small.

To assess the risks in your workplace, follow the five steps in the diagram

What to do if you have an accident at work

If someone has an accident or a “near-miss” at work, you should report it straight away to someone with responsibility for safety. If someone is injured they should always see a first-aider, and fill out an accident report form. If this isn’t available, make a written statement about what happened, sign and date it, and get a witness to sign it.

ASSESSING RISKS

STEP 1

WHAT ARE THE HAZARDS?

Assessing hazards doesn’t need to be a complicated process, you just need to walk around your workplace (for example a venue, recording studio, rehearsal room or teaching room) and look for things that could cause harm. Ignore the trivial and concentrate on significant hazards that could cause serious harm or affect several people.

STEP 2

WHO MIGHT BE HARMED?

You don’t need to list people by name, just think about the different groups of people who may be affected, such as:

Yourself and your co-workers.

Your audience, students or clients.

Other people who work there, such as road crew, technicians, bar staff, etc.

STEP 3 IS MORE NEEDED TO CONTROL THE RISK?

How likely is it that someone could actually be harmed by each hazard? You must decide whether or not you need to do more to reduce the risk, or if the existing precautions are good enough. It's usually impossible to make things a hundred percent safe and even after precautions have been taken there is usually some risk remaining, so what you have to decide for each hazard is whether the **remaining risk is high, medium or low**.

The aim is to take whatever action is necessary to make all risks **low**.

To do this you need to ask yourself these questions:

Can I get rid of the hazard altogether?
If not, how can I control the risks so that harm is unlikely?

If you can't get rid of the hazard completely try to apply the following principles:

- 1 Try a less risky option
- 2 Prevent access to the hazard
e.g. – cordon off the area around electrical equipment.
- 3 Organise the work to reduce access to the hazard
e.g. – stay in the dressing room when not performing to reduce your exposure to loud music.
- 4 Use protective equipment
e.g. earplugs.
- 5 Provide welfare facilities
e.g. a chill-out area or washing & first-aid facilities.
- 6 Thinking about the risks in this way will also help to make you more safety conscious generally, so if something does go wrong you will be better prepared to deal with it.

STEP 4 RECORD YOUR FINDINGS

If there are more than five employees involved you must write down the main findings of your assessment. Even if there are less than five employees involved it may still be useful to write down what you've done.

You need to show that:

- 1 A proper check was made.
- 2 You asked who might be affected.
- 3 You dealt with the obvious main hazards and took extra precautions where necessary.
- 4 The remaining risk is low.

An example from a typical gig might be:

"Danger of trip hazard to performers due to trailing power cables in walkway from dressing room to stage. Cables taped down and covered with anti-slip mat".

STEP 5 REVIEW YOUR ASSESSMENT AND REVISE IT IF NECESSARY

Over time your working methods and equipment will probably change, so it is important to go back and review your assessment every so often to make sure it's still relevant.

COMMON RISKS FOR MUSICIANS

Danger of electrocution from unsafe electrical equipment.
Hearing problems from listening to loud music.
Back injuries from poor lifting technique or bad posture.
Repetitive strain injury (RSI).
Specific hazards that relate to singers and specific instruments.
Tripping up
Fire risks
Crowd control

This isn't a complete list. You will no doubt think of other things you could add. The important thing is to stay switched-on about safety and be constantly on the lookout for things that could go wrong – especially if you are working with different people in lots of different venues.

ELECTRICAL SAFETY

Electricity is dangerous, and musicians have been injured or even killed from electric shocks whilst practising or performing. You don't need a lot to kill you, either: a current as small as 50 milliamps is enough (a 40 watt light bulb takes about 150 milliamps) and the bigger the current, the quicker and more dangerous its effects.

It's not all bad news, though: good quality equipment is perfectly safe if it's set up and maintained properly. The HSE's pamphlet Electrical safety for entertainers (www.hse.org.uk) will tell you everything you need to know, but the main points are as follows:

- Have all your equipment tested regularly by a qualified electrician.
- Regularly check all your mains plugs and cables for damage, cuts, bare wires, loose connections, etc.
- Remember that even gear that isn't plugged directly into the mains can be dangerous. Anything connected by a cable, such as a guitar or a speaker carries a potentially lethal current, and you should avoid touching one piece of gear whilst you're holding another.
- Always use an RCD (residual current device, or circuit breaker) on the wall-socket that feeds your plug boards; it will shut the power off if there's a problem. They are sold in most electrical shops, and if it saves your life it will be the best £30 you've ever spent.
- Don't overload plug boards by using multi-way adapter plugs. Buy more boards – they're safer and more reliable. Never 'daisy chain' plug boards i.e. plug them into each other in a line.
- Always use the correct fuse for the job, and never be tempted to substitute ordinary wire or silver paper. Even with the right fuse you still need an RCD.
- Don't assume that someone else's gear is safe. Always have it checked before you use it, and if in you have any doubts don't use it. If a piece of gear starts to overheat or catch fire, unplug it from the mains before you use an extinguisher on it.
- Secure leads and cables with gaffa-tape and keep drinks away from anything electrical. Finally, if someone does get a shock, shut off the power immediately – but don't touch them without insulating yourself first – and call an ambulance.

NOISE

Working with loud noise is often seen as a natural part of a musician's life but prolonged exposure to even relatively modest sound levels can cause irreparable hearing damage. The risk depends on two things:

- How loud the sound is.**
- How long you are exposed to it.**

Sound levels are measured in decibels (dB), and the following table shows some typical comparable levels.

140	Jet taking off from 25m
125	Rock band / club sound system
100	Chainsaw
96	Symphony orchestra
85	Hearing protection must be worn (Noise at Work Regulations 1989)
80	Heavy lorry from 5m
60	Busy street
40	Office
20	TV / radio at home
0	Faintest audible sounds



As you can see, in regular working environments, such as factories and warehouses hearing protection must be worn at levels above 85dB, but sound levels at live gigs and dance events often exceed 125dB, and rehearsals, small gigs and even orchestral concerts can reach danger levels. Hearing damage can occur if you're repeatedly exposed to levels as low as 80dB – about the level of a wagon driving past – and the risk increases as the volume goes up.

What you need to do to reduce the risk:

- Turn it down! Rehearsals, especially, don't need to be ear-shatteringly loud. A reasonable level for a three-hour session is about 85dB. If you're not sure what this sounds like, borrow a soundmeter and check your volume.
- Use earplugs. Specially designed musician's plugs cut the volume without altering the tone.
- Don't stand too close to your speakers. If you have problems hearing your monitor when you play live, raise it closer to ear level and turn down the backline or move it back a bit. If you have the choice always use the newer type of in-ear monitors – they work at a much lower volume.
- High frequencies are particularly dangerous, so beware of feedback and raise the drum kit so the cymbal frequencies aren't right in your ears.
- If you work in a recording studio keep the monitor level as low as possible.

Finally, your ears are your livelihood so look after them. Walk away from the sound sometimes to give yourself a break. If you do have a problem, see a doctor, get some information and get protected.

TIP

For more info see the Musicians' Union information sheet NOISE AWARENESS FOR MUSICIANS
www.musiciansunion.org.uk

LIFTING

Over a quarter of all injuries at work are back strains caused by poor lifting technique. Musicians are often involved in heavy lifting, so try to follow these guidelines:

- Try not to lift at all. Use a mechanical aid such as a trolley or hoist wherever possible, or better still, let someone else do the lifting.
- If you have to lift, check the weight beforehand and ask for help if you think it's too heavy.
- Bend your knees and keep your back straight.
- Grip the load securely, and keeping your back straight, lift the load letting your legs take the strain.
- Take care not to twist your body. If you need to change direction, keep your body straight and move your feet.
- Finally, lay the load down gently by bending your knees and keeping your back straight.

REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURY (RSI)

Repetitive Strain Injury is an umbrella term that covers a range of musculoskeletal conditions such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tenosynovitis, cramp and tendonitis. RSI can affect the spine and both the upper and lower limbs, causing symptoms such as numbness, tingling, sharp pain, dull ache, weakness, loss of grip and restricted movement of limbs.

These symptoms could clearly be disastrous for a working musician so it is important to treat RSI as a serious risk. The following might help:

- Each instrument has its own risks – be sure you know what yours are.
- Devise a warm-up and stretching routine, including a warm up with your instrument, and do it before you play.
- Cool down and stretch after you play.
- Vary your playing technique and posture.
- Take regular breaks during practice and rehearsal sessions.
- If you sit down to play make sure your seat is the right height and that it allows for movement and rest.

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

This section contains some tips and hints on good practice.

SINGERS

Straining to be heard over loud music can cause scars called 'nodes' on your vocal chords, which can be permanent. To avoid this, warm up properly before gigs by doing vocal and physical exercises. Avoid, or humidify, dry centrally heated atmospheres as much as possible as they dehydrate your air-passages - a throat spray can help. Smoking and alcohol are bad for your throat. If you have repeated problems with your voice, get medical advice, there may be a more serious problem which needs looking at. Always have some water at your side and consider getting vocal training to help strengthen your voice.

KEYBOARD PLAYERS AND MUSIC TECHNOLOGISTS

The main problem is back pain from hunching over the keyboard - improved posture is the only real answer. Many suffer from strained tendons from hitting the keys too hard – better technique will help. If RSI is a problem, make sure you warm up properly before you play and take regular breaks during practice. Massage and relaxation exercises can also help. Long hours in front of a computer can be bad for your eyesight, so take regular breaks, relax, exercise and use a comfortable 'ergonomic' chair with a proper backrest.

GUITAR AND BASSISTS

Wear a broad strap to avoid shoulder trouble, and for wrist, tendon and RSI problems, see above. Warm up with gentle wrist and finger exercises before gigs and practice, and stretch to cool down afterwards. "There are a number of guitars on the market now that have been designed to be light and therefore aid musicians with back problems." Mark Singleton

DRUMMERS AND PERCUSSIONISTS

As with keyboard players, bad posture can cause back problems. Get a better drum-seat, preferably with a backrest and work on keeping your back straight. Sticks can cause blisters, especially when your hands are sweaty. If you can get away with it, wear gloves, but always try to keep cool – use an electric fan if necessary. Better stick technique is the best bet, though. Wrist, tendon and RSI problems are very common so deal with these as above. The most important thing to remember is that drumming is very physical activity, and you should always warm up slowly before you play.

ORCHESTRAL PLAYERS

For orchestral and band musicians the main problems are back problems from bad posture and RSI. Long, regular rehearsals and gruelling concert schedules can take their toll, so proper warm-ups, regular breaks and relaxation and massage are more or less essential. Many find yoga or Alexander Technique particularly helpful.

DJS

RSI can be a problem, - see above. Watch your eyes – if you're working in dark environments, try to use an overhead light. Make sure you have your phones set at an appropriate level.