How to Carry Out a Risk Assessment: The Five Steps Explained

Health & Safety · Published 1 June 2026 by Integral Safety Ltd · integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/how-to-carry-out-a-risk-assessment-the-five-steps-explained



Why Risk Assessment Matters in Law

Risk assessment is the process of identifying what could cause harm in your workplace, deciding whether existing precautions are adequate, and putting sensible, proportionate controls in place where they are not. It sounds simple, and it should be, but it is also a legal duty rather than a box-ticking exercise. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require every employer to carry out a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to employees and to anyone else who might be affected by their work, including contractors, visitors and members of the public.

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 sets the underlying duty: employers must do what is reasonably practicable to protect people. Risk assessment is how you demonstrate that you have thought this through systematically rather than relying on guesswork. If you employ five or more people, the significant findings must be recorded in writing, but in practice almost every business benefits from a written record regardless of headcount, because it is the evidence that a proper process took place.

Some sectors have additional or more specific assessment duties on top of the general one. Construction sites, care homes, schools and manufacturing environments all carry particular hazards, so many organisations combine general workplace assessments with task-specific ones for things like manual handling, working at height or hazardous substances.

Step One: Identify the Hazards

A hazard is anything with the potential to cause harm: working at height, hazardous substances, electricity, moving machinery, manual handling, slips and trips, lone working, or poor air quality. Start by walking the workplace and looking at what actually happens day to day, not what the procedure says should happen. Hazards are often found in the gap between the two.

Talk to the people doing the work. Employees and contractors frequently know about risks that are not obvious from an office or during a scheduled inspection, such as a workaround that has become normal practice or a piece of equipment that behaves differently under load. Check manufacturers' instructions for plant and substances, and review accident and near-miss records, which often reveal patterns that a single walk-round would miss.

Hazards fall into broad categories worth checking systematically: physical (noise, vibration, temperature), chemical and biological (substances covered by COSHH), ergonomic (manual handling, repetitive tasks, workstation design) and increasingly psychosocial (stress, fatigue, workload, violence and aggression). Staff who handle chemicals or lift and carry regularly often benefit from COSHH awareness or manual handling awareness training to support the controls you identify.

Step Two: Decide Who Might Be Harmed and How

For each hazard, be specific about who could be harmed and in what way. This is not just "employees"; think about contractors, delivery drivers, cleaners working outside normal hours, and members of the public passing through or near the site.

Pay particular attention to groups who may be at greater risk. New and young workers may lack experience to spot danger. Expectant mothers may need specific adjustments. People with disabilities, lone workers, and night shift staff all warrant separate thought. In sectors such as care homes or housing associations and almshouses, residents and vulnerable visitors add another layer that a generic assessment will miss if it is not written with that population specifically in mind.

Step Three: Evaluate the Risks and Decide on Controls

Once hazards and the people affected are identified, decide what to do. The legal test is what is reasonably practicable, weighing the risk against the time, cost and effort of controlling it. This is not an excuse to do nothing; for most workplace hazards, sensible and affordable controls exist.

Work through the hierarchy of control in order, starting with removing the hazard altogether and treating personal protective equipment as the final layer for residual risk.

- Elimination: removing the task, substance or activity entirely
- Substitution: a safer material, process or piece of equipment
- Engineering controls: guarding, local exhaust ventilation, fixed barriers
- Administrative controls: procedures, permits to work, training and supervision
- PPE: respiratory protection, gloves, eye protection, where risk remains

For fire, the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, which applies in England and Wales, requires the responsible person for most non-domestic premises to carry out a fire risk assessment. It needs its own specific attention rather than being a single line on the general assessment. Our fire risk assessment service covers that requirement.

Step Four: Record, Implement and Assign Responsibility

Writing down your findings is not the end point; it forces you to implement the controls rather than leave them as good intentions. A good record shows the date of the assessment, who carried it out, the hazards identified, who is at risk, the existing and additional controls, who is responsible for putting each control in place, and a target date for completion.

Legal responsibility for ensuring assessments happen sits with the employer, but day-to-day competence is usually delegated. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require every employer to appoint one or more competent persons to assist with health and safety duties, which for many smaller organisations means either training an internal manager or using an external competent person service. Whoever signs the assessment off needs to understand both the hazard and the operation well enough to judge whether the controls are realistic.

Controls that depend on training should link back to actual courses delivered and refreshed, not a generic statement of intent. If a control assumes staff have completed IOSH Managing Safely or site-specific induction, keep training records alongside the risk assessment so an inspection or audit can trace the two together. Listing "staff trained" as a control with no supporting record is a common gap.

Step Five: Review and Update

There is no single fixed legal interval for reviewing a risk assessment, but good practice is to treat it as a living document rather than a one-off project. Review it whenever something changes: new equipment, a different process, new starters, a change of premises, or new legislation. An accident or near miss should prompt an immediate review rather than waiting for the next scheduled date.

Many organisations build in an annual review as a baseline even where nothing obvious has changed, simply because operations drift over time in small ways that add up. If an incident does occur, findings from any accident investigation should feed directly back into the relevant risk assessment.

Version control matters here. Keep dated copies, note what changed and why, and make sure the current version is the one in use on the shop floor or site office, not an old print-out pinned to a noticeboard.

Common Mistakes and Getting It Right

Most risk assessment failures are not caused by employers ignoring the law outright. They are caused by the process becoming disconnected from the actual work. The same handful of mistakes come up across very different sectors, from manufacturing and engineering sites to construction

projects and schools.

- Treating risk assessment as paperwork completed once a year rather than a working tool
- Copying a generic template without adapting it to the actual workplace, tasks and people
- Identifying sensible controls but never confirming they were implemented or still work
- Writing assessments without input from the people who actually do the job
- Failing to review after a change, accident or near miss
- Assuming a training record exists when it has lapsed or was never completed

If you are not confident your current risk assessments would stand up to scrutiny, an independent view often helps. Integral Safety, based in Coalville and working across the East Midlands, provides health and safety consultancy to help you carry out or review risk assessments properly, and independent auditing and inspection to confirm your controls work in practice rather than just on paper. If you are in or around Coalville or elsewhere in the East Midlands, get in touch to talk through your requirements.

Talk to Integral Safety Ltd

We are health and safety consultants based in Coalville, Leicestershire, working with businesses across the East Midlands. If anything in this guide applies to your workplace, we can help.

Phone	01530 382 150 or 01664 400 450
Email	info@integralsafetyltd.co.uk
Website	integralsafetyltd.co.uk

This guide is general information about UK health and safety law and practice, correct as at 11 November 2026. It is not advice on your particular circumstances. The latest version is at https://integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/how-to-carry-out-a-risk-assessment-the-five-steps-explained.