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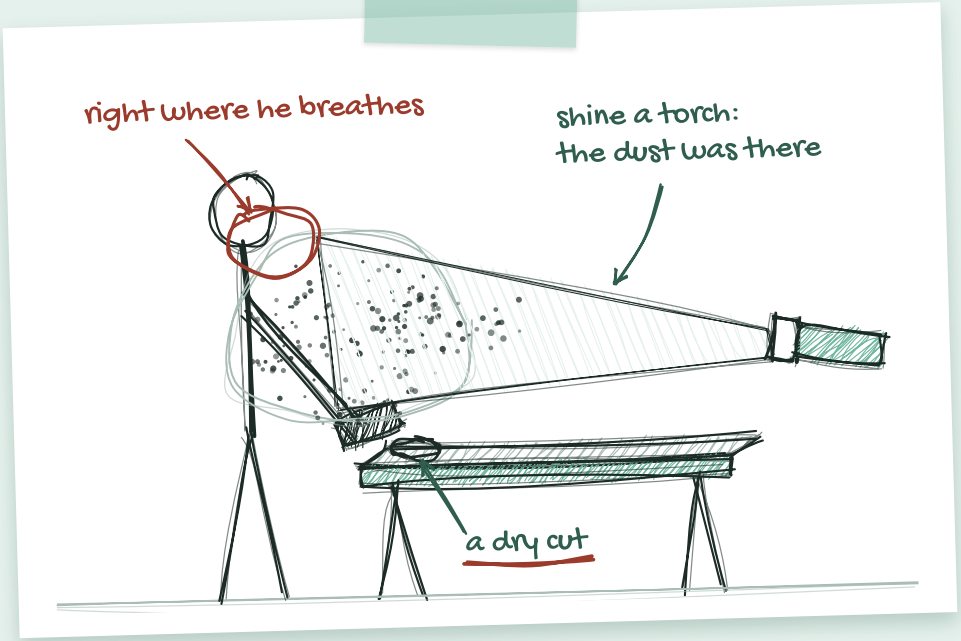
Field guide 10



Work-related health

Dust, silica and noise: the harm you can't see today, and the disease that shows up years later.

For middle managers and senior leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand

Health and safety field guide 10
Edition 2.3
Published 27 October 2026

She cleaned up after the stone

For about 20 years, a woman cleaned the workshop of her family's stonemason business. She had no respiratory protection.

Over time she became more and more short of breath. Doctors found a lung disease that is a known effect of silica dust: fine dust from stone, concrete, brick and engineered stone. Treatment did not stop it. She died of respiratory failure.

Her son was a stonemason too. He had breathed heavy stone dust for at least eight years, but he felt well. Screening found silicosis anyway: scarring of the lungs caused by silica dust. He has stopped working with the dust, and his lungs are stable so far.

Their story comes from a report for doctors by Health New Zealand and WorkSafe. It does not name them.

What the story shows

She never cut the stone. She swept up after it. Dust harms everyone who breathes it, and the harm can grow for years before anyone feels ill.

Why this guide starts here

Much work-related harm happens without a moment anyone sees. Nobody falls. Nobody bleeds. The damage builds up in lungs and ears, and the illness shows up years later.

This guide is about that slow harm: dust, silica and noise. Page 14 tells more of the stone workers' story.

Stopping the dust costs money today. Silicosis can't be undone.

Sources Edwards, A. (Health New Zealand) and Cotton, S. (WorkSafe), Interstitial lung disease in engineered stone workers in New Zealand (data at August 2024); WorkSafe, Safety alert: accelerated silicosis (November 2019).

About this guide

Who it is for

Senior leaders who decide on equipment, materials, ventilation and health monitoring budgets.

Middle managers who set up tasks, check controls are used and make sure workers get monitored.

How to use it

Read pages 2 to 8 at your own pace. Then take the spotting pages (9 and 10) and the torch test on page 17 onto the floor. Write what you find on page 20. Page 21 explains the key words.

Field guide 1 explains the ideas behind the series. Field guide 11 covers chemicals, fumes and gases. Field guide 12 covers asbestos.

Finding your way

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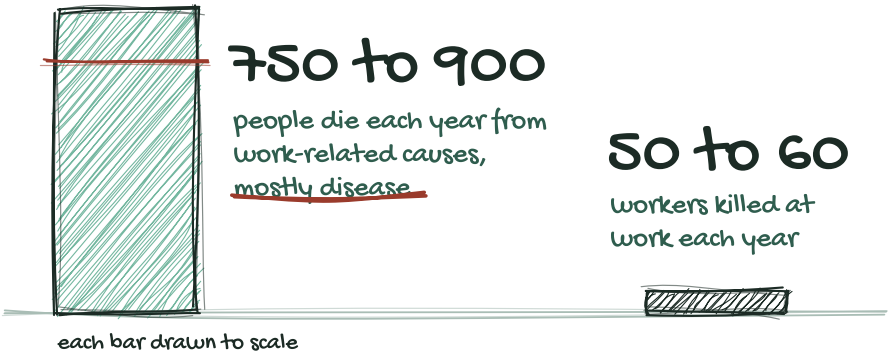
Reading these pages

- A taped card with footprints: something to try at work
- A small compass: the sentence or point after it is this guide's view
- A pink box with a red edge: what changes from 1 April 2027
- A hatched edge with a compass: this guide's own view
- A tinted box: the law, WorkSafe guidance or court facts
- The foot strip: sources. Untinted tables, sketches and checklists are this guide's own
- Priority dots (this guide's rating): one means watch, three means act today

In this guide, "the Act" means the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, "s" means section and "ss" means sections. "The 2016 Regulations" means the Health and Safety at Work (General Risk and Workplace Management) Regulations 2016. "The 1995 Regulations" means the Health and Safety in Employment Regulations 1995, parts of which are still in force. This guide gives general information. It is not legal or medical advice. Written to the plain language standard in the Plain Language Act 2022 (s 5).

The deaths you don't hear about

WorkSafe estimates that 750 to 900 people die in New Zealand each year from work-related causes. Most of these deaths come from disease, not injury.



WorkSafe says the burden of work-related ill-health "far outweighs the burden from work-related injuries". Some of its other estimates:

- About 5,000 to 6,000 hospital stays a year because of health risks at work.
- About 400 cancer deaths in 2015 caused by work exposures. Most were lung and respiratory cancers.
- About 250 deaths in 2015 from other work-related lung disease.
- About 270,000 workers probably exposed to silica dust, and about 250,000 to wood dust.
- Between 36% and 46% of workers say they are exposed to loud noise at least a quarter of the time.

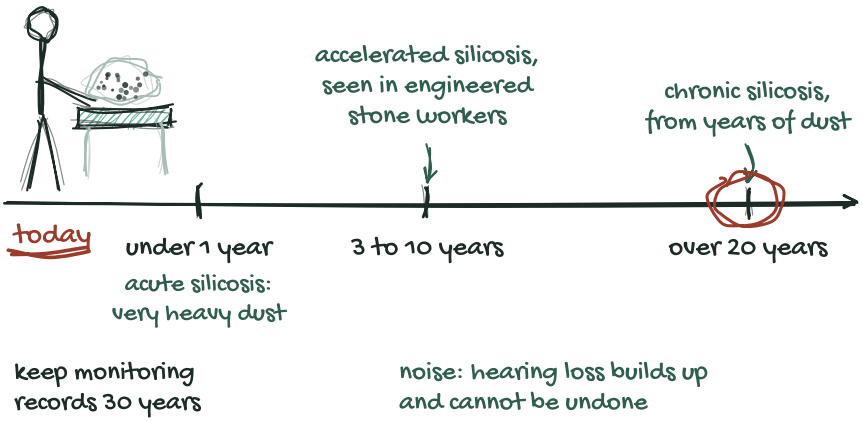
What the numbers mean for you

Safety gets the attention because injuries are seen on the day. Health harm is quieter, and it kills more people. Much of it starts with dust or noise that someone could have measured and reduced.

Sources WorkSafe, What is work-related health? (updated August 2019); Overview of work-related harm and risk in Aotearoa New Zealand (June 2024), pp 2, 4, 35, 41. These are estimates from different years.

Today's dust, tomorrow's disease

Dust and noise rarely hurt on the day. The harm builds up, and illness can appear many years later.



The years show how long people breathed the dust. WorkSafe says accelerated silicosis typically takes 3 to 10 years, and chronic silicosis more than 20.

WorkSafe calls silicosis "an irreversible and progressive disease". It scars the lungs, and it keeps getting worse. Silica dust can also cause lung cancer and other long-term lung disease.

Noise works the same way. WorkSafe says "hearing loss is irreversible". It can come from loud noise over a long time, or from one sudden blast.

Other exposures

Wood dust is common too. Field guide 11 covers chemicals, fumes and gases. Field guide 12 covers asbestos, which WorkSafe links to 200 to 250 deaths in 2015.

Sources WorkSafe, Silica dust in the workplace (January 2020); Safety alert: accelerated silicosis (November 2019 and March 2024); Noise, an introduction; Overview of work-related harm and risk (June 2024), pp 39, 41; the 2016 Regulations, reg 32.

What the law asks

The main duty covers health as well as safety. Specific rules set limits and require monitoring.

Rule	What it asks of you
The main duty **ss 30, 36**	Remove risks to health so far as is reasonably practicable: what you can reasonably do at the time, once you weigh how likely the harm is, how bad it could be, what you know, and what controls exist (s 22). If you can't, reduce them. Monitor workers' health and the conditions at work (s 36(3)(g)).
Exposure limits **2016 Regulations, reg 29**	Nobody may be exposed to a substance above its prescribed exposure standard (PES). Most standards are guidance, not PES (page 8).
Exposure monitoring **2016 Regulations, regs 30, 32**	If you are not sure whether exposure is over the standard, you must measure it. Keep the records for 30 years.
Health monitoring **2016 Regulations, regs 31, 35, 36, 39, 42**	Checking workers' health for early signs of harm, such as a hearing test. Required for some substances that pose a serious health risk. An occupational health practitioner must supervise it. The PCBU (the business, a "person conducting a business or undertaking") pays, gives the worker their report, and keeps records confidential for 30 years.
Noise **1995 Regulations, reg 11**	No employee may be exposed to more than 85 dB(A) (decibels, adjusted to match how people hear) averaged over 8 hours, or a peak of 140 dB. This applies "whether or not the employee is wearing a personal hearing protection device".

Records that outlast careers

Thirty years is longer than most jobs, and longer than many businesses. Keep the records where someone will find them after you have gone.

Sources the Act, ss 30, 36; the 2016 Regulations, regs 29 to 42; the 1995 Regulations, reg 11; WorkSafe, Noise: the law.

Law changes from 1 April 2027

Dust and noise move up the list. The Amendment Act became law on 9 July 2026.

Noise and harmful substances become critical risks

New Schedule 1A lists "noise in the workplace" and "substances that are hazardous to health". It also lists asbestos.

Occupational disease counts

A hazard is also a critical risk if it is likely to cause an occupational disease (new s 22A). This means a disease "listed in Schedule 2 of the Accident Compensation Act 2001".

Silica is not named

Schedule 1A does not name silica. WorkSafe classes crystalline silica as a carcinogen. Silica dust will usually meet the critical risk test.

If you have fewer than 20 workers

You are a small PCBU. If numbers vary, you are small if you reasonably expect fewer than 20 in at least 9 months of the financial year (new s 17(3) to (5)). Only critical risks, such as noise and most silica dust, fall under ss 36 to 43 (new s 25A). Welfare facilities, notifying events, consulting and exposure rules still apply.

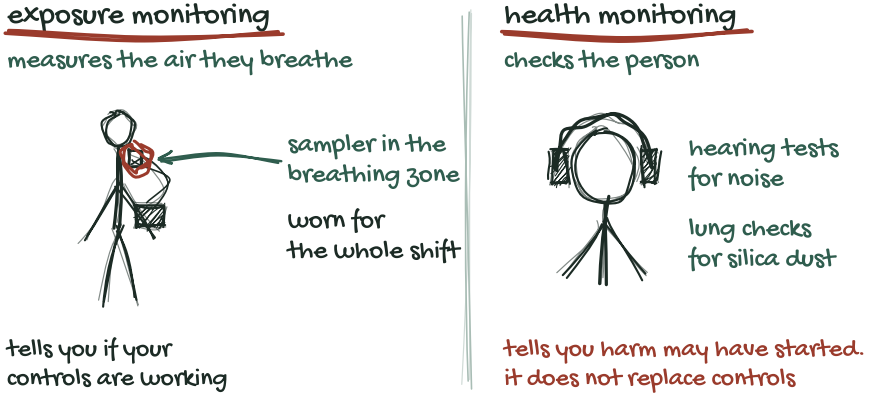
Getting ready

- [ ] List each task that makes dust or loud noise, and where it happens.
- [ ] Find your latest exposure results. If you have none, book monitoring.
- [ ] Check who is due for health monitoring, and that they got their results.

Sources the Amendment Act 2026 (new ss 17(3) to (5), 22A, 25A, Schedule 1A); WorkSafe, Silica, crystalline; Understanding the changes (2026).

Measure, don't guess

You can't see the finest dust, and people get used to noise. Measuring is the only way to know.



WorkSafe says exposure standards apply to "personal monitoring", so the sampler goes on the worker, close to the face. It recommends help from an occupational hygienist.

Two kinds of exposure standard

Type	What it means
Workplace exposure standard (WES)	"A guidance value" from WorkSafe. Silica has one. Use it to judge your controls.
Prescribed exposure standard (PES)	Set in regulations, a safe work instrument or hazardous substances law. It "must be complied with" (reg 29).

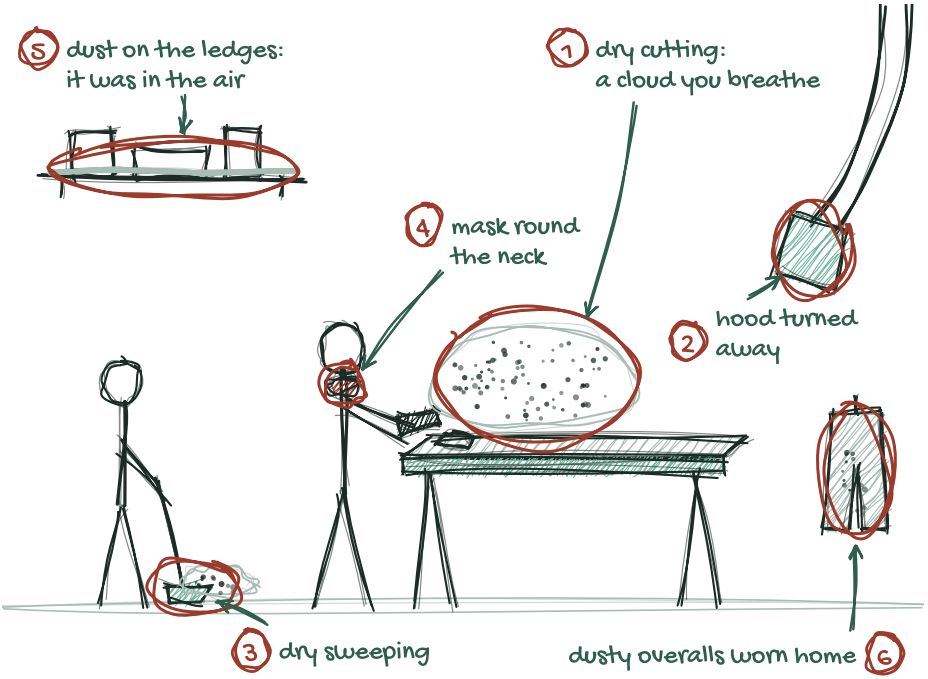
A result below a WES "does not guarantee that all workers are protected". For silica the WES is 0.025 mg/m^3 over a working day, and WorkSafe says "significant risk to workers will remain" at that level.

Aim well below. A result just under the standard is a warning, not a pass. Keep reducing exposure so far as is reasonably practicable.

Sources the 2016 Regulations, reg 29; WorkSafe, Applying the workplace exposure standards (February 2025); Workplace exposure standards and biological exposure indices, 16th edition (July 2026), s 1.1; Silica, crystalline (all forms).

What to look for

Benchtop shops are where New Zealand has found accelerated silicosis. The same signs show up anywhere people cut, grind, drill or sweep.



The numbers match the table on the next page. The six checks also work on a building site, in a joinery or in a foundry.

Dust is easiest to see in sunlight or a torch beam. Noise is easiest to hear when you try to talk.

Sources WorkSafe, Safety alert: accelerated silicosis (March 2024); Silica dust in the workplace.

Six things to spot

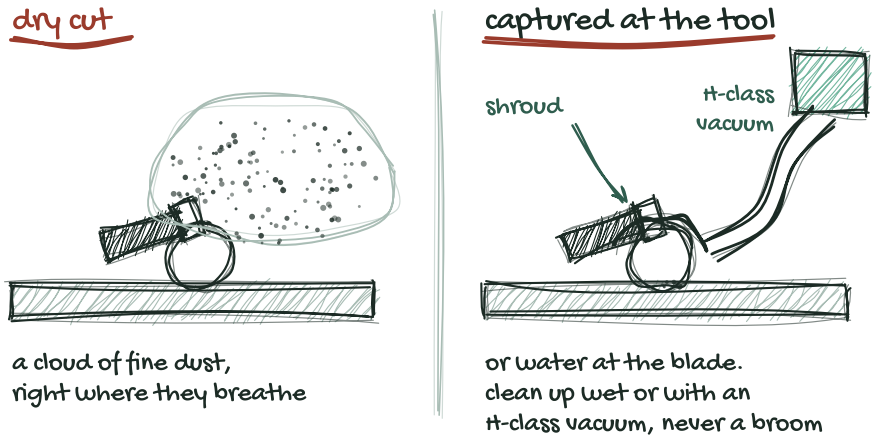
	What it looks like	Why it matters, and what to do	Priority
1	A cloud when someone cuts, grinds or polishes dry.	That is the dust people breathe. WorkSafe says uncontrolled cutting of engineered stone, a man-made stone often used for kitchen benchtops, "is unacceptable". Stop until water or extraction is working.	●●●
2	An extraction hood turned away, or a hose that is blocked or split.	Extraction, a hood or shroud that sucks dust away, only works close to the dust. Put it back. Check someone maintains it.	●●●
3	A broom, or someone blowing dust off with an air line.	It lifts settled dust back into the air. Clean wet, or with an H-class vacuum (an industrial vacuum with a filter rated for hazardous dust).	●●○
4	A mask round the neck, or a beard under a tight-fitting mask.	The mask protects nobody. Ask why it is off. Check each person's fit test, which checks a tight-fitting mask seals on their face.	●●○
5	Dust on ledges, beams and light fittings.	It was in the air first. Ask when exposure was last measured.	●●○
6	Dusty overalls worn home, or left in the car.	Dust travels to homes and families. WorkSafe says dusty clothes should stay at work to be cleaned.	●●○

Try it this week

Take this page to one dusty or noisy task. Find all six. Then ask the crew which one they would fix first. They often know a seventh.

Silica dust: stop it at the source

The best dust control is the one that works before anyone breathes the dust.



What WorkSafe says to do, best first

- **Use a lower-silica material:** engineered stone "can contain in excess of 90% crystalline silica". Granite has less than 45%.
- **Wet the dust:** "use water spray or misting systems to suppress dust".
- **Capture it at the tool:** fit on-tool extraction, or use local exhaust ventilation.
- **Clean without lifting dust:** no dry sweeping or compressed air. Use an H-class vacuum or clean wet.
- **Protect and check people:** provide fit-tested respirators, and "provide health monitoring for all your workers who may be exposed".

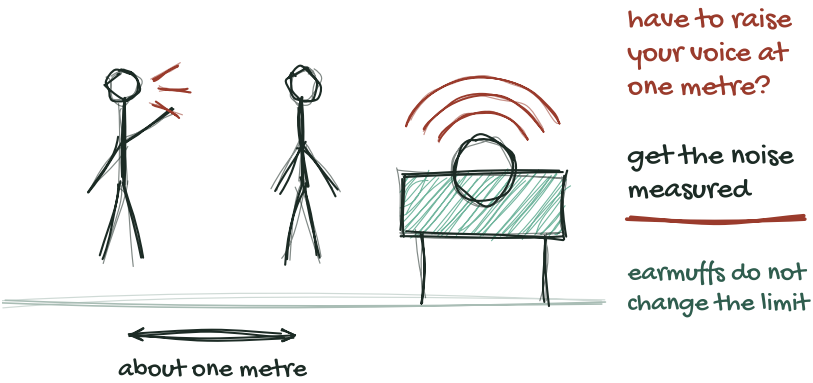
Common practice falls short

WorkSafe found that 49.2% of workers who handled concrete, stone or brick worked with neither water nor local extraction.

Sources WorkSafe, Engineered stone and exposure to respirable crystalline silica (March 2024); Safety alert: accelerated silicosis (March 2024); Silica dust in the workplace (January 2020); Overview of work-related harm and risk (June 2024), p 41.

Noise: quieter first, earmuffs last

The noise limit is 85 dB(A) averaged over 8 hours, or a peak of 140 dB. WorkSafe says it "always applies, whether or not your workers are wearing hearing protection".



WorkSafe's quick check asks: "Do you need to raise your voice to communicate with someone about one metre away?" If the answer is yes, get the noise measured.

Reduce it in this order

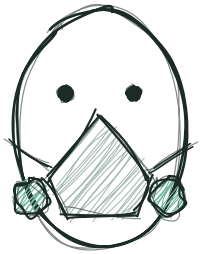
- Buy quieter equipment, and maintain it.
- Enclose noisy machines, or move them away from people.
- Limit time in noisy areas.
- Then provide hearing protection, and check people wear it.

WorkSafe also says: "Arrange audiometry tests with an occupational health practitioner for workers exposed to harmful levels of noise."

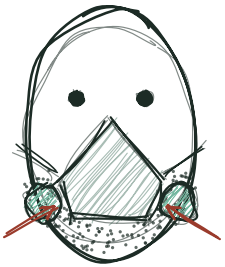
Sources the 1995 Regulations, reg 11; WorkSafe, Noise: the law (September 2018); How noisy is your work? (September 2018). The order of controls follows the 2016 Regulations, reg 6.

Respirators only work if they seal

WorkSafe says respirators "shouldn't be the first or only control measure you consider". When you do need them, they have to fit.



clean-shaven
the mask seals on skin



a day's stubble
air leaks in round the edge

- Fit-test each worker when you first give them a respirator, and at least once a year.
- Use a competent person to do the fit test.
- WorkSafe warns: "Facial hair and stubble (even one day's growth) make it almost impossible to get a good seal."
- For engineered stone, WorkSafe expects workers who cut, install or clean up to wear respirators, even with other controls in place.

Ask to see the fit test

Pick two people wearing tight-fitting masks. Ask to see their fit test records. Check the dates are within the last year, and that the mask they wear today is the one they were tested in.

Sources WorkSafe, Respiratory protective equipment: advice for businesses (December 2020); Safety alert: accelerated silicosis (March 2024).

The stone workers

Doctors at Health New Zealand and WorkSafe described three engineered stone workers in a report for other doctors.

Who	Exposure	What happened
A stonemason, 56	Worked with engineered stone without respiratory protection.	A cough and breathlessness. It first looked like another disease. A biopsy found silica, and complicated silicosis. Treatment did not help. He was referred for a possible lung transplant.
A woman, 53	Cleaned the family workshop for 20 years, without respiratory protection.	Breathlessness that got worse. A lung disease known to follow silica exposure. She died of respiratory failure.
Her son, 33	At least eight years of heavy exposure.	No symptoms. Screening found silicosis. He stopped the exposure and is stable.

Across the country

ACC, WorkSafe and Health New Zealand set up an assessment pathway for engineered stone workers. By August 2024, 22 workers had been diagnosed with silicosis, from 222 claims. About 1,000 workers were eligible. The report says uptake "has not been as high as hoped".

If someone has worked with engineered stone

WorkSafe says people who have worked with engineered stone for at least six months in the last 10 years may be eligible for a health assessment. Tell your workers, including the ones who clean up.

Sources Edwards, A. and Cotton, S., Interstitial lung disease in engineered stone workers in New Zealand (data at August 2024); WorkSafe, Safety alert: accelerated silicosis (March 2024).

What inspectors found

Since 2019, WorkSafe inspectors have visited engineered stone businesses again and again. Many still needed orders to fix their controls.

Period	Businesses visited	Businesses given an action	Enforcement actions
2019	101	64	113
Sept 2020 to June 2022	138	90	200
May 2022 to Feb 2023	21	18	44
June 2023 to Oct 2024	102	67	131

Some businesses received more than one action.

WorkSafe says businesses have improved since 2019. But "inspectors continue to issue enforcement actions to businesses where risks are not being controlled effectively". It warns against comparing the numbers between years, because the checks have changed.

What it means for leaders

- **Expect to be checked again.** Revisited businesses still got actions. Controls need checking, not just installing.
- **Measure what you can't see.** Without measurement, you can't tell whether controls work.
- **Keep the paper trail.** Your monitoring records will show what you knew, and when.

Sources WorkSafe, Our prevention activities with the engineered stone industry (updated 13 November 2024).

When the work changes

With dust and noise, cause and effect can be 20 years apart. So the same task needs a different approach as the situation shifts. Field guide 1 explains why.

What is happening	How to manage it	Priority
A fixed process, with controls that have been measured Clear	Check the controls are used and maintained. Repeat monitoring on schedule.	●○○
A new material, tool or process Complicated	Get an occupational hygienist to measure it. Design controls from the data, not from old results.	●●○
Mobile crews, changing sites and weather Complex	Build controls into the tools so they travel. Check in often. Learn from each job.	●●○
A worker is diagnosed with silicosis Chaotic	Support the worker. Stop that exposure now. Offer checks to everyone who did the same work. Then report and learn (field guide 5).	Act now
Nobody knows when monitoring was last done Confusion	Give monitoring one owner. Book it. Find the old records.	●●○

Clear to Complex: the job leaves the workshop

The cut moves from a bench with extraction to a kitchen with a hand grinder. The controls stay behind.

Clear to Complicated: the new benchtop

A cheaper stone or a new abrasive arrives. Old monitoring results no longer tell you anything.

Sources The situation names in colour come from the Cynefin framework (Snowden and Boone, 2007, who called Clear "Simple" and Confusion "Disorder"; current names from Snowden and Friends, 2021).

Signs worth a closer look

Controls drift. Hoods get moved, filters clog, and messy sprays get switched off.

What you might see or hear	What to do	Priority
Water sprays or extraction switched off to keep the job moving.	Find out what got in the way. Fix that, then switch the control back on.	●●●
A worker mentions a cough or getting short of breath.	Take it seriously. Encourage them to see a doctor. Check the exposure of everyone on that task.	●●●
A new product on the bench, and no safety data sheet.	Get the data sheet. Check the silica content before anyone cuts it.	●●○
People raise their voices to talk at one metre.	Get the noise measured. Reduce it at the source.	●●○
Dust on surfaces the morning after.	Check extraction and water. Ask for exposure monitoring.	●●○
Nobody can say when monitoring was last done.	Name one owner. Book the monitoring.	●●○

The torch test

During a dusty task, stand to one side and shine a strong torch across the air near the worker's face. Dust you couldn't see often shows up in the beam. If it drifts past their face, they are breathing it.

Running the job

It is Friday afternoon. The install crew has one cut left, the water feed is leaking, and the client wants it finished today. What you say next decides whether that cut goes dry.

Before work starts

- [ ] Check the data sheet for any new material.
- [ ] Make sure water or extraction is set up and working on every tool.
- [ ] Check respirators are fit-tested, and people are clean-shaven where they need to be.

While work is happening

- [ ] Watch for visible dust. Listen for raised voices.
- [ ] Stop dry sweeping and blowing down with air.
- [ ] Ask whether anything has changed in the task or material.

Afterwards

- [ ] Keep exposure and health monitoring on schedule.
- [ ] Make sure workers see their own results.
- [ ] Tell your manager about controls you can't fix without money.

What to say at the last cut

"Not dry. Not even one. We'll fix the water or come back Monday." Say it once, out loud, and the crew will know the rule is real.

Health monitoring is not a control

Health monitoring tells you harm may already be happening. It checks whether your controls work. It does not replace them.

Take these to your next meeting

Senior leaders and officers

- [ ] Which of our tasks create dust or loud noise?
- [ ] Do we have measured exposure data for each?
- [ ] Are any results close to an exposure standard?
- [ ] Could we switch to safer materials or quieter equipment?
- [ ] Who gets health monitoring, and are we told the trends?
- [ ] Are noise and silica dust on our critical risk list?
- [ ] Will our records be findable in 30 years?
- [ ] As an officer, how do I check for myself that water or extraction is provided and used on every dusty task? (s **44**)

Two measures a board can track: dusty or noisy tasks measured in the last year; workers overdue for health monitoring.

Middle managers

- [ ] Is extraction or water working on every tool today?
- [ ] Is anyone cutting or sweeping dry?
- [ ] When were respirators last fit-tested?
- [ ] Who is overdue for a hearing test?
- [ ] Do we have a data sheet for every material?
- [ ] Has the work moved somewhere without controls?
- [ ] Have workers seen their monitoring results?

If one of our workers is diagnosed with lung disease in 20 years, what will our records show we did today?

Notes

Field notes

ideas for this page:

- the torch test: where you saw dust
- where you had to raise your voice
- what the crew said they would change
- monitoring due, and who books it
- respirators: last fit test dates

write it down here

Key words

The words people use about dust and noise, in plain English.

Word	What it means
PCBU	A "person conducting a business or undertaking". Usually an organisation.
Reasonably practicable	What you can reasonably do at the time. You weigh how likely the harm is, how bad it could be, what you know, and what controls exist. Cost is weighed last. It rules a step out only if it is grossly disproportionate to the risk. s 22
Silica dust	Fine dust from stone, concrete, brick and engineered stone. Experts call it respirable crystalline silica, or RCS. "Respirable" means small enough to reach deep into the lungs.
Engineered stone	A man-made stone, often used for kitchen benchtops. It can contain more than 90% crystalline silica.
Silicosis	Scarring of the lungs caused by silica dust. It cannot be reversed.
Exposure standard	A level of a substance in the air, in mg/m^3: milligrams in a cubic metre of air. Most are WorkSafe guidance (WES). A few are set in law (PES). Page 8 explains.
dB(A)	Decibels, the unit for noise level, adjusted to match how people hear.
Exposure monitoring	Measuring what is in the air a worker breathes, or the noise they hear.
Health monitoring	Checking workers' health for early signs of harm, such as a hearing test (audiometry).
Extraction	A hood or shroud that sucks dust away where it is made. Also called local exhaust ventilation.
H-class vacuum	An industrial vacuum with a filter rated for hazardous dust such as silica.
Occupational hygienist	A specialist who measures exposure at work and advises on controls.
Fit test	A test that checks a tight-fitting mask seals on one person's face.

Sources the Act, s 22; WorkSafe, Silica dust in the workplace; Applying the workplace exposure standards; Engineered stone and exposure to respirable crystalline silica; Safety alert: accelerated silicosis (November 2019 and March 2024).

Check it yourself

How this guide was checked

Every statement of law or fact in this guide was checked against a primary source before printing: the Act, the regulations, the Amendment Act 2026 as passed, WorkSafe guidance and data, or the clinical report. Each check is recorded in a claims register, with the source and date checked. Statements that could not be checked were removed. Facts checked on 12, 22, 23 and 24 October 2026.

Law

1. Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, ss 22, 30, 36, 44. legislation.govt.nz
2. Health and Safety at Work (General Risk and Workplace Management) Regulations 2016, regs 6, 29 to 42.
3. Health and Safety in Employment Regulations 1995, reg 11.
4. Health and Safety at Work Amendment Act 2026 (became law on 9 July 2026): new ss 17(3) to (5), 22A, 25A and Schedule 1A.
5. Plain Language Act 2022, s 5.

WorkSafe guidance and data

6. What is work-related health? (2019); Overview of work-related harm and risk in Aotearoa New Zealand (June 2024).
7. Workplace exposure standards and biological exposure indices, 16th edition (July 2026); Applying the workplace exposure standards (February 2025); Silica, crystalline (all forms).
8. Silica dust in the workplace (January 2020); Engineered stone and exposure to respirable crystalline silica (March 2024); Safety alerts: accelerated silicosis (November 2019, March 2024); Our prevention activities with the engineered stone industry (November 2024).
9. Noise: the law; How noisy is your work?; Noise, an introduction; Respiratory protective equipment: advice for businesses (December 2020); Understanding the changes to health and safety law (July 2026). worksafe.govt.nz

Clinical and research

10. Edwards, A. (Health New Zealand) and Cotton, S. (WorkSafe). Interstitial lung disease in engineered stone workers in New Zealand. Data at August 2024. rnzcgp.org.nz
11. Snowden, D. J., and Boone, M. E. (2007). A leader's framework for decision making. Harvard Business Review, 85(11), 68 to 76. It called Clear 'Simple' and Confusion 'Disorder'.
12. Snowden, D., and Friends (2021). *Cynefin: Weaving sense-making into the fabric of our world*. Cognitive Edge, The Cynefin Co. The current situation names on page 16.

Other guides that help

Health risks touch most of the series.

Guide	Read it for
1	Leading health and safety, and why the same task needs a different approach in different situations.
2	Trust and verify. How to check a control works, not just that it exists.
4	Worker voice. The crew often knows first when a control has stopped working.
6	Critical risks and critical controls, in full.
11	Hazardous substances: chemicals, fumes, gases, storage and emergencies.
12	Asbestos, which WorkSafe links to 200 to 250 deaths in 2015.

The whole series

1 Leading health and safety · 2 Trust and verify · 3 Shared duties · 4 Worker voice · 5 When things go wrong · 6 Critical risks and critical controls · 7 Vehicles, mobile plant and traffic · 8 Working at height · 9 Psychosocial risk and mental health · **10 Work-related health** · 11 Hazardous substances · 12 Asbestos · 13 Machinery, plant and energy isolation · 14 Remote, isolated and lone work

Sources

Work-related health in one minute

- Far more people die from work-related disease than from work accidents.
- Dust and noise harm slowly. Silicosis and hearing loss can't be undone.
- Stop dust at the source with water or extraction. Never cut or sweep dry.
- An exposure standard is not a safe line. Aim well below it.
- Measure the air and check people's health to see if controls work.
- Respirators and earmuffs come last, and work only if they fit and are worn.

The field guides

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