University Health and Safety

Fact Sheet

Working Alone

Working in isolation can be risky, especially if you are working with dangerous materials. Working on your own may be necessary sometimes, but the risks involved need to be carefully considered before doing so.

Hazards

When working alone, assistance may take longer to arrive or be difficult to contact, particularly if you become injured or are busy working on a critical experiment. For example, the University's hazardous materials spill team is not available after hours, and a contracted company would have to alerted and then travel from off-campus to assist. If you are working alone and are incapacitated by a chemical exposure or are entrapped in a piece of machinery, no one will be around to help you, which may create a dangerous or fatal situation. Nobody plans to have something go wrong, which means you need to be prepared for any potential consequences of being alone if an incident occurs.

Considering the Risks

Consider the need to work alone

It is always better to work when other people are around, even if you are doing low-risk procedures. For example, if you have a medical related emergency, such as a heart attack, no one would be available to call for help, and when help does arrive, they may assume that you were exposed to chemicals, rather than having a personal medical emergency. Look for ways to reschedule your work to a time when more people are around, or closer to standard working hours. Ask your lab mates if somebody would be able to come in and work at the same time, so neither one of you works alone. Remember that work after hours is always discouraged, so try to keep your hours between 8:00am and 5:00pm. Finally, if you think you will have to work alone, think about the risks.

Consider the materials and equipment involved

Some materials and equipment may be considered too hazardous to work with alone, depending on hazards or worker experience level. These include:

- Energetically reactive materials, including pyrophorics, air, water or shock-sensitive materials, and large quantities of flammables
- Explosive or potentially explosive materials
- Highly toxic materials
- Drill presses
- Lathes
- Mills

If your procedure requires any of these, consider rescheduling or finding a way to have others with you. Discuss the hazards involved with your PI before starting work alone – they may be able to help you think of a safer way to get the work done, and must provide approval if you do need to work alone.

Consider the procedure itself

Only established procedures with Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) should be considered. You should also be specifically trained to perform the procedure while working alone as part of your lab-specific training. Make sure the SOP includes all relevant safety information, as well as how to handle a spill or other emergency. Think about what could happen as part of the procedure. If there is a spill, will you be able to handle it alone, or would you need the hazardous materials team? Is there a possibility of you needing assistance with any step of the procedure?

Consider your own experience level and personal circumstances

Only conduct procedures alone if you are well-trained and experienced in the particular process. Only perform procedures alone if your PI has approved you to do that specific task while working alone. If you are not feeling well, strongly consider doing the procedures later when others can be around. Another reason to postpone is if you are stressed, distracted by external circumstances, or tired – these can distract you from your work and potentially cause safety issues.

Consider the worst-case-scenario

What would be the worst consequence of something going wrong with your procedure? Would you get exposed to chemicals and faint, becoming unable to rescue yourself? Would you get trapped in a piece of machinery, and be unable to call for help? If a fire, explosion, or severe acute health hazard such as toxic chemical exposure or mechanical harm, is possible, reconsider working alone, and reschedule if at all possible.

Approval and Training

- Discuss the risks of working alone and get your PI's approval before beginning. Make sure the PI knows what work you will be doing and when you will be doing it, especially if it will be after-hours. Notify them about the times you will be working alone every time, so they are aware that you are in the lab.
- Your lab may want to consider making a specific SOP for working alone, or for working alone on specific procedures. Anybody who works alone in the lab should be trained and approved for working alone. This should be documented as part of lab-specific training, and include who is trained and allowed to work alone, and what they are trained to do. Remember that minors are *never* allowed to work alone, even with training. Minors must *always* have somebody with them during work, even if they are undergraduate students.

Safe Ways to Work Alone

If you have considered the hazards, discussed the risks with your PI, and still have a need to work alone, there are various ways to ensure your safety. While working with others is always preferred, the methods below provide an increased level of safety if you must work alone.

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Post a Sign

- Signage should include your name, what you're working with, when you becan work and who to call if there is a problem or emergency
- In case of an incident, somebody coming in the door to help or investigate would need to know this information

"Buddy System"

- Ask somebody working nearby to check on you regularly
- If you notice somebody in a lab nearby is working alone as well, you could arrange with them to check in with each other at regular intervals
- If you don't check in at the expected time, they should come check on you to make sure you're okay, and you should check in on them at regular intervals as well

Phone Check-Ins

- Have a lab mate, your PI, or a friend check in with you by phone
- Call them at regular intervals (or have them call you) to check in and make sure you're okay
- If you don't call or don't answer when they call, they should provide assistance or call for help if needed

Security Systems/Webcams

- If your lab often has people working alone, your group may want to consider a security system or webcams.
- You can set up webcams for certain areas, and ask somebody to check up on you while you're working
- There are also "panic button" or "lone worker" apps that would send an alert to others if the phone doesn't detect movement, or if a specific button is pressed.

Questions

If you have any questions about working alone or ways you can work alone more safely, contact your Department Safety Officer, your DEHS Research Safety Professional, or call the DEHS main office at (612) 626-6002. A safety professional will be able to provide guidance on working alone, safety measures, and other concerns.