

Working over or near to water

Managing and controlling the risks associated with working over or near to water is something that most people will only do on rare occasions. This could present a problem, due to being ill prepared when the need arises. The dangers in doing such work are significant, and must be proactively managed.

The Health and Safety Executive states that the following factors often contribute to accidental drowning:

- A failure to provide personal buoyancy equipment, or when equipment is provided, it does not operate properly.
- A disregard for or misjudgement of the risk severity of getting it wrong.
- A lack of supervision.
- An inability to cope when a problem arises, and the absence of competent rescuers and appropriate rescue equipment.
- A failure to take weather forecasts into account.



Significant hazards and risks to be controlled

Safety considerations

- Consider all of the factors that could pose a risk of drowning. Appropriate rescue equipment must be selected and maintained as necessary. Everyone on site must be familiar with the rescue procedure, and understand the actions to be taken in an emergency. People who cannot swim should not enter the water, but raise the alarm and wait for assistance.
- Measures need to be in place to prevent falls, along with secondary measures to prevent a falling person from entering the water. Where falls are possible, and cannot be eliminated, consider the structure: establish if there is a risk of serious injuries resulting from impact with the structure, if a fall occurred.
- Consider any risks of the person being unconscious when they enter the water, and if so, will the lifejacket automatically inflate and turn their face upwards? All lifejackets must meet the relevant British Standard.
- Not all falls will result in the worker entering the water. In these circumstances, consideration must be given to a worker suffering from suspension syncope (fainting) by being left suspended in a harness above the water for too long.
- It is important that workers have been trained in the use of rescue equipment (e.g. lifebuoys and rescue lines), and received general safe working at height guidance and training in how to avoid falling into the water, as well as what actions to take if they do fall. For rescue boat operators and crew, additional training will need to be provided so that they are Royal Yachting Association (RYA) trained.

Health considerations

- Consider that if rats are present, leptospirosis (Weil's disease) could be contracted from contaminated water, and also digestive illnesses caused by swallowing water contaminated with natural organisms, chemicals used in the work processes, or other substances such as diesel oil.
- The risks from catching hypothermia from being in cold water need to be factored in, in case rescue is not immediate.

Environmental considerations

- The control of substances in terms of storage (to ensure that they cannot fall or leak into the water and cause pollution), and their safe use when refuelling rescue craft.
- Procedures need to be in place to monitor weather conditions, tidal sequences and flow rates of rivers.
- Specific wildlife in the area that could be affected by the work need to be identified and controlled accordingly.

Safe system of work considerations

- Safe work-at-height practices must be in place to mitigate the need for rescue.
- If rescue is required, procedures in place need to allow for the prompt location and rescue of anyone who is in the water. If injuries have been sustained, arrangements need to be in place to ensure that the emergency services can be contacted immediately when someone falls into the water, so that they can be on their way while the rescue is being carried out.
- If a mobile elevating work platform is being operated over water, a risk assessment must determine whether a harness will be worn, as in some cases workers who are attached by a harness or lanyard are at a greater risk of drowning.

Relevant further information

- GEIS6 *The selection, management and use of mobile elevating work platforms* (free online HSE publication).

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