



Safe Use of Knives and Other Sharps

Preventing Lacerations

Lacerations are one of the most common forms of occupational injury and are almost always caused by “sharps”. Most people associate lacerations with knives, but sharps come in many forms: utility knives, pointed or bladed tools, needles, sheet metal, broken glass, scissors, and even paper can all cause painful and potentially severe injuries.

Learning to handle sharps correctly to avoid injury involves a combination of choosing the correct tool for the task, using the correct personal protective equipment, and adhering to safe work behaviors while performing a task requiring sharps. Use the following best practices to avoid injury.

Choose the Correct Tool for the Job:

1. Pointed or bladed tools should only be used for the job they were designed for. For example, scissors should not be used for prying, scrapping, or punching holes. Using a scissor in this manner could break the blade or point, causing an injury, and will also dull the blades making them less efficient and more difficult to use.
2. Do not use more “knife” than you need for the job. For example, a large carving or chef’s knife is not appropriate for boning fish or paring potatoes. Intricate or fine work requires a smaller knife with a smaller blade.
3. When possible use a sheet cutter, instead of a utility knife, for cutting flat sheets of plastic or paper. This provides greater control over the cutting operation and keeps hands away from the path of the blade.
4. Many tasks require a blade edge but not a sharp point. For these tasks you can add protection against puncture wounds by using round-tip blades.
5. Consider using only self-retracting utility knives. They have spring-loaded blades that push out of the knife body with finger pressure and then retract automatically when pressure is released. This is safer than standard utility knives that leave blades exposed unless manually retracted.
6. Hook knives are good for cutting string or twine because they guard the blade to prevent accidental contact with the fingers or other body parts.
7. Keep tools in good repair. Remember: a sharp knife is a safer knife. Dull blades require more force and are more likely to slip than sharp ones. Change or sharpen blades whenever they start to tear or give resistance rather than cut.
8. Ensure guards are in place on slicers, mixers, blenders, fans, electrical tools or any other equipment with spinning or moving equipment that can cause lacerations. Stop use and notify your supervisor immediately if you find unsafe conditions or unsafe equipment.

Use the Correct Personal Protective Equipment for the Job:

1. Wear safety glasses when working with any hand tools, including knives.
2. Wear a leather glove on your free hand while cutting with a utility knife. This will afford some protection if the knife slips toward the hand holding the work.
3. Use cut-resistant gloves for high production jobs such as chopping or slicing in the kitchen. But remember, they are *cut resistant*, not *cut proof* - injuries can still occur.
4. Use Kevlar-material gloves whenever working with sheet metal or other materials that have sharp edges. The material is supple enough to allow hand dexterity but affords protection against lacerations. As with other cut-resistant gloves, Kevlar is not cut proof and will not protect against the jab of a sharp point.

5. Use heavy leather gloves for jobs that do not require high hand dexterity but may expose the employee to splinters, sharp edges, rough surfaces, or staples. Examples include whenever handling lumber, when pruning trees or shrubs, or handling or opening cardboard boxes.

Practice Safe Work Behaviors:

1. Always keep the free hand or any other body part away from the line of cut.
2. Always **pull**, never push, the knife when making a cut on a flat surface. Pulling motions are stronger and more positive than pushing motions, so the knife is less likely to slip.
3. Do not strike or chop at objects with a knife. The blade could deflect and cut you. Make a firm, smooth cut.
4. Don't extend utility knife blades any more than needed to cut the material and retract the blade whenever it is not in use.
5. Never carry sharps in clothing or pockets. Use a scabbard or other carrier.
6. When cutting rope or twine, do not bend the rope into a loop and insert the knife into the loop facing toward them. Consider using a hook knife designed for this purpose.
7. Never pick up broken glass with hands, even if wearing gloves. Use a broom and dustpan. Do not put sharps or broken glass in the trash without first containing it. Place broken glass in a cardboard box or other sturdy container that the glass will not cut through, then tape shut. Marking the container as "broken glass" is always a good idea.
8. Do not leave sharps in drawers or containers people may reach into. In kitchen areas do not leave knives submerged in soapy water. Someone could reach into the water and cut themselves.
9. Use food pushers to advance food in machines. Fingers should never be exposed to moving parts or blades. If machine guards are not present, stop use and notify your supervisor.
10. Provide long-handled brushes for cleaning blades. These will allow you to remove crumbs, dust, food particles, etc. without putting your hands too close to the sharp edge.

Questions/Comments?

Please contact Environmental Health and Safety at (530) 898-5126