

Workplace Safety and Health for the Veterinary Health Care Team



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KEYWORDS

- Occupational safety • Occupational health • Regulations • Needlestick injuries
- Hazardous drugs • Animal bites

KEY POINTS

- Employers should develop and implement a comprehensive safety and health program, including written standard operating procedures, that address occupational safety and health risks that are specific to their clinic. This program should be consistent with national, regional, state, and other applicable standards and regulations.
- A written infection control plan is an important component of a comprehensive veterinary clinic safety and health program.
- Management commitment, employee involvement, and initial and refresher training for staff on all aspects of the program are keys to success.
- Many resources are available to help employers develop clinic guidelines to prevent occupational injuries and illnesses from bites and scratches, sharps, and hazardous drugs, as well as other hazards commonly encountered in veterinary medicine. Some of these resources are provided at the end of this article.

INTRODUCTION

Veterinary practice is associated with a large number of potential chemical, biological, physical, and psychological hazards that vary with the workplace setting and the type of tasks performed. Veterinary employers are responsible for ensuring that workplace hazards are identified and evaluated, from animal-related hazards to chemical

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exposures. Employers should develop and implement a comprehensive, customized, written safety and health program to address and prevent those hazards. A program that identifies and addresses recognized workplace hazards is an important step toward preventing workplace illnesses and injuries. Training employees about the hazards they are exposed to and encouraging them to report work-related illnesses and injuries are important aspects of an effective safety and health program. A written infection control plan is an important component of a comprehensive safety and health program.

The principles of occupational safety and health are universal and many of the recognized hazards are found worldwide in veterinary clinics. This article focuses on workplace standards in the United States but other countries have similar workplace standards and guidance.

The elements and principles of workplace standards relevant to veterinary clinics are reviewed, including the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Recordkeeping, Hazard Communication, Personal Protective Equipment, Respiratory Protection, and Bloodborne Pathogens Standards. Information about selected veterinary safety and health hazards is presented, including sharps injuries, animal bites and scratches, and hazardous drug exposures. Strategies to reduce the potential for adverse safety and health effects of workplace hazards and resources for training and education are provided. Information about the cost of work-related injuries and illnesses and the economic incentives of an effective safety and health program that prevents these costly incidents is presented. Additional information about each of these topics is provided in the Resources section.

GENERAL CLINIC PREVENTION

Developing an Occupational Safety and Health Program

Developing and implementing a comprehensive workplace safety and health program that identifies and addresses the serious hazards of each workplace is an important foundation for preventing illnesses and injuries. Management commitment and employee involvement in the development, communication, and implementation of the program are critical to its success (**Box 1**). A worksite evaluation that assesses all workplace activities and processes is needed to identify workplace hazards. It is helpful to consider the typical hazards that are found in many veterinary workplaces; however, it is also important to identify any additional or different potential hazards in each specific workplace. Employers should develop written standard operating procedures that address the hazards in their workplace. International and national resources with information about common hazards found in veterinary clinics are provided in the Resources section.

Box 1

Safety and health program critical elements

1. Management commitment and employee involvement
2. Worksite analysis to identify hazards
3. Hazard prevention and control
4. Training for employees, supervisors, and managers

From OSHA. OSHA fact sheet: effective workplace safety and health management systems. 2014. Available at: <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/safety-health-management-systems.pdf>. Accessed July 5, 2014.

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