Working alone or in isolation

Working alone under certain circumstances can increase the risk to an individual’s health and safety. Simon Fraser University outlines expectations and measures to minimize the risk for faculty, staff and students when working alone through its policy GP 39, Working alone or in isolation. For the complete policy text, refer to GP 39.

What is working alone?

For some research, academic and operational activities, working alone increases the risk to an individual’s health and safety since assistance may not be readily available should an injury, illness or emergency occur. Examples include activities where there is:

- potential for hazardous material exposure (e.g., chemical, biological or radiological materials)
- potential for exposure to hazardous equipment (e.g., laser or X-ray-emitting devices)
- risk of injury or illness due to environmental conditions or violence

The person working alone or ‘lone worker’ is out of visual or verbal contact with another, is physically isolated and/or does not expect contact from another person for more than an hour. Working alone can occur during normal working hours as well as in the evening, overnight or during weekends.

These requirements apply to all SFU campuses and to SFU work at off-campus locations.

Who is responsible for assessing the risk of working alone?

Department Chairs/Directors will ensure that faculty, staff and students are aware of the requirements and support implementation of working alone provisions in their respective departments.

Supervisors (including Principal investigators, faculty, instructors and staff) should identify situations where workers, including themselves, are working alone and conduct a risk assessment accordingly.

Workers, students and other persons, before working alone, should participate in the risk assessment and obtain supervisor approval, and should follow any measures put in place when working alone.

Mandatory working alone assessment

1. Working alone should be avoided whenever possible, especially outside normal working hours.
2. If working alone is needed, conduct a working alone risk assessment and obtain supervisor approval.
3. Gather the following information to assess the risk of working alone:
   - What tasks and hazards are involved in the work?
   - What consequences could result from a worst-case scenario or serious incident?
   - Is it possible that an incident or injury would prevent an individual from calling for help?
   - What is the level of the individual’s training and experience?
   - How does the individual access emergency assistance?
4. Assign a risk level based on the activities proposed.

- **High risk - Working alone is prohibited.** Examples include using flammable solvents in presence of open flame, pyrophoric chemicals, potentially explosive chemicals or compounds, acutely toxic chemicals or gases, machines or power tools that may cause critical injury (e.g., lathe, table saw), and electrical systems rated at more than 750 volts.

- **Moderate risk - Presence of others is strongly recommended; a Working alone safety plan and Check-in protocol is required (see below).** Examples include working with large volumes of chemicals, biohazardous materials, class 3B & 4 lasers, radioactive materials, X-ray-emitting devices, human subjects, and exposed, energized electrical systems.

- **Low risk - May work alone but a check-in protocol is recommended.** Examples include doing routine office work or study, using laboratory analytical equipment, and doing laboratory work not involving hazardous materials or equipment.

**Working alone safety plan**

For moderate risk activities, a written working alone safety plan is required with the following elements:

- List the tasks that may be conducted as part of the work
- Identify hazards associated with each task (e.g., chemical hazards, biohazards, equipment hazards)
- Identify any limitations and prohibitions for certain tasks or activities
- Outline existing control measures such as personal protective equipment (PPE) and standard operating procedures (SOPs) that must be used
- Develop new control measures (SOPs) if necessary
- Implement the check-in protocol (see below)
- Outline response procedures in case of emergency

**Check-in protocol**

Implement a check-in protocol which ensures regular check in of the lone worker either by the supervisor or Campus Public Safety. For more information see: [https://www.sfu.ca/srs/campus-safety-security/public-safety/safety-programs.html](https://www.sfu.ca/srs/campus-safety-security/public-safety/safety-programs.html)