TOOLBOX TALK · HEALTH & SAFETY

Machinery Guarding & Isolation: *Never Trust a Switch*

PUWER 1998: guards, safe isolation, lockout and tagout, stored energy and why 'I only turned it off' is how people lose hands.

Last reviewed: August 2026 HSE · PUWER 1998 England, Scotland and Wales ukworkrights.co.uk

In Northern Ireland, similar duties come from Northern Ireland's own health and safety law. Contact HSENI (Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland), not the HSE.

THE RISK

How machinery injuries happen

- The majority of serious machinery injuries happen during **cleaning, clearing blockages, setting and maintenance**, not normal running
- Common injuries are **amputations, crush injuries, entanglement and degloving**
- Guards get removed **for speed** and then never replaced
- Interlocks get **defeated** with tape, magnets or spare keys because they slow the job down
- 'It was switched off' is not isolation. **Someone else can switch it back on**
- **Stored energy** in springs, hydraulics, compressed air, raised loads and capacitors can move machinery after power is removed
- Loose clothing, gloves, jewellery and long hair are a serious **entanglement risk** near rotating parts

MOST AMPUTATIONS HAPPEN DURING CLEANING

The moment of highest risk is when the guard is off and the machine is being cleared. That is exactly when isolation matters most and is most often skipped for speed.

THE LAW

Guarding and safe isolation

- PUWER reg. 11 requires **effective measures to prevent access to dangerous parts**: fixed guards first, then interlocked guards, then other protection devices
- PUWER reg. 19 requires equipment to be fitted with **clearly identifiable and accessible means of isolation**
- Safe isolation means **isolate, lock off, tag, prove dead and release stored energy**
- **Each person working on the machine applies their own lock**. A single shared lock is not safe isolation
- Only reconnect when **every lock is removed by its owner** and the machine has been checked clear
- Guards must be **maintained**. A guard that no longer works is not a guard
- **Defeating a guard or interlock is an offence** under s.8 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974

YOUR LOCK, YOUR KEY, YOUR LIFE

Lockout works because only the person inside the machine can release their own lock. If someone else holds a spare key, the system protects nobody.

YOUR RIGHTS

What you can expect

- **Machinery that is properly guarded** and maintained. This is the employer's duty
- **Training and instruction** on the equipment before you use it, including on isolation
- **Locks and tags provided** where isolation is required
- Enough **time** to isolate properly rather than being pushed to work live
- To **refuse to work on unguarded machinery** where you reasonably believe there is serious and imminent danger (Employment Rights Act 1996 s.44 and s.100)
- To **report a defeated guard without detriment**, and to report it to HSE on 0300 003 1647 if nothing is done

PRODUCTION PRESSURE IS NOT A DEFENCE

If the only way to hit the target is to work with the guard off, the target is wrong. Say so in writing. That record protects you and forces the issue.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Frequently asked questions

Q Is it illegal to remove a machine guard?

Section 8 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 makes it an offence to intentionally or recklessly interfere with or misuse anything provided for health and safety, which includes guards and interlocks. Guards may only be removed under a controlled procedure with the machine safely isolated.

Q Isn't switching the machine off enough?

No. A switch can be operated by someone else, and it does not deal with stored energy in hydraulics, springs, compressed air or raised parts. Safe isolation means isolating, locking off with your own lock, tagging, proving dead and releasing stored energy.

Q What if I'm told to work with the guard removed?

You are protected from dismissal and detriment for refusing work you reasonably believe is seriously and imminently dangerous. Raise it in writing with your supervisor. If it continues, HSE can be contacted on 0300 003 1647, and being punished for raising it is unlawful.

FOR WHOEVER RUNS THIS TALK

Delivery notes & attendance record

Before you start

The two failure modes to focus on are guards defeated for speed, and isolation that relies on a switch someone else can flip. Ask whether anyone has ever cleared a blockage without isolating. Most people have.

Questions to ask the team

1. Has anyone ever cleared a jam without isolating the machine? What made that feel necessary?
2. Are any guards on our machines removed, taped or bypassed right now?
3. Who holds the locks, and could someone else energise the machine while you're inside it?
4. What stored energy is there after isolation: springs, air, hydraulics, gravity, capacitors?

The law behind this talk

Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 (regs. 11 and 19: dangerous parts and isolation); Electricity at Work Regulations 1989 reg. 12; Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 s.2

Employers must give workers comprehensible information, instruction and training on the risks they face, Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 s.2(2)(c) and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 reg. 10. Keep the record below as evidence that you did.

Attendance record

Topic	Machinery Guarding & Isolation: Never Trust a Switch
Date	
Site / location	
Delivered by	
Actions agreed	
Next talk due	

Attendees

Name	Signature

Use the Print handout button to print this record. General information only, not legal advice. This toolbox talk is generic material and is not a substitute for a suitable and sufficient risk assessment by a competent person. Employers remain responsible for their duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

FREE H&S GUIDES

Machinery Guarding & Isolation *free guide*

Get plain-English information on your rights and your employer's legal duties.

HSE: REPORT AN ISSUE
0300 003 1647
hse.gov.uk

ACAS
0300 123 1100
acas.org.uk

CITIZENS ADVICE (ENGLAND)
0800 144 8848
citizensadvice.org.uk

CITIZENS ADVICE (WALES)
0800 702 2020
citizensadvice.org.uk

CITIZENS ADVICE SCOTLAND
0800 028 1456
cas.org.uk

UK WORK RIGHTS
Machinery Guarding & Isolation
ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-machinery.html

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OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact Acas

- Helpline: 0300 123 1100, Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm.
- Another language: call the helpline and ask for an interpreter. Acas says it can provide one straight away.
- Welsh: Acas can provide its services in Welsh if you ask.
- Cannot hear or speak on the phone: Relay UK, 18001 0300 123 1100, on the Relay UK app or a textphone. You type what you want to say and get text replies from the adviser.
- British Sign Language (BSL): call the helpline through the InterpretersLive! video relay service, in your browser or on the InterpretersLive! app. The interpreter calls Acas and translates between you and the adviser.
- If you cannot call the helpline (for example, you find it hard to speak on the phone, you are not in the UK, or you don't have enough phone credit), use the Acas accessibility form to ask for advice another way. Acas usually replies by email within 10 working days, by BSL or lip reading video call within 2 working days, or by phone within 5 working days. Acas reviews these requests Tuesday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.
- Early conciliation: if your case is already in conciliation, contact your conciliator. Their details are in your "Introducing Your Conciliator" email.
- Training, mediation support, collective conciliation or arbitration (not advice): Acas Training and Customer Services, 0300 123 1150, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, or email events@acas.org.uk. Relay UK: 18001 0300 123 1150. You can ask for an interpreter or call through InterpretersLive!. To book a BSL interpreter in advance for any Acas service, email events@acas.org.uk or call 0300 123 1150.

OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact Citizens Advice in England

- Adviceline: 0800 144 8848. Usually open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, not on public holidays. Free from mobiles and landlines. At busy times you might wait up to an hour. If you call from a mobile you'll be asked for your postcode.
- Cannot hear or speak on the phone: Relay UK. Dial 18001 then 0800 144 8848, using the app or a textphone. There's no extra charge.
- Money or debt: debt helpline 0800 240 4420, Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm, Saturday 9.30am to 1pm, not on public holidays. Relay UK: 18001 then 0800 240 4420.
- Online chat with an adviser: debt problems (Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm, Saturday 9.30am to 1pm); claiming Universal Credit (Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm); energy bills or supply, consumer problems, or any other problem (Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm).
- Your local Citizens Advice: search by postcode or town on the Citizens Advice website. Most can only help if you live or work in their area.

OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact Citizens Advice in Wales

- Advicelink: 0800 702 2020. Monday to Friday 8am to 7pm, Saturday 9am to 1pm, not on public holidays. Free from mobiles and landlines. At busy times you might wait up to an hour.
- Cannot hear or speak on the phone: Relay UK. Dial 18001 then 0800 702 2020, using the app or a textphone. There's no extra charge.
- Online chat with an adviser: usually Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.
- Your local Citizens Advice: search by postcode or town on the Citizens Advice website.

OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact Citizens Advice in Scotland

- Free phone line to your local bureau: 0800 028 1456. Say the first part of your postcode and you'll be put through.
- British Sign Language (BSL): make a free BSL call to an adviser through the Contact Scotland BSL website or app (video relay interpreting on a computer, tablet or mobile). Contact Scotland BSL is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Language or access needs: tell the bureau and they'll do their best to meet them.
- Applying for Universal Credit for the first time: Help to Claim helpline 0800 023 2581, Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm, or webchat on the Citizens Advice Scotland website. There's also a BSL service for Universal Credit applications.
- Defined contribution pensions (aged 50 or over): Pension Wise, 0800 138 3944, or +44 20 3733 3495 from outside the UK.
- NHS complaints in Scotland: Patient Advice and Support Service (PASS), 0800 917 2127, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.
- Gambling Support Service advice line: 0800 328 1131, Monday to Friday, 10am to 3pm.
- Your local bureau: find its contact details and opening times by postcode on the Citizens Advice Scotland website.
- If you cannot hear or speak on the phone, you can use Relay UK to make the call by typing. Use the free Relay UK app, or a textphone: dial 18001 first, then the number.

OTHER WAYS TO GET HELP

Ways to contact HSE

- Tell HSE about a health and safety issue: use the online form, or call 0300 003 1647 and HSE will fill it in for you. Building safety (Building Safety Regulator): 0300 790 6787.
- Ask HSE about health and safety, or reach a named person at HSE: use the online form, or call 0300 003 1747.
- Both lines: Monday and Tuesday 8.30am to 5pm, Wednesday 10am to 5pm, Thursday and Friday 8.30am to 5pm.
- Fatal and major injuries only: Incident Contact Centre, 0345 300 9923, Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 5pm. Report everything else online.
- Out of hours, only after a work-related death, a serious incident with several casualties, or one causing major disruption: duty officer, 0151 922 9235.
- Cannot hear or speak on the phone: HSE says it provides a text relay service for people who are D/deaf, hard of hearing or have a speech impairment.
- If you cannot hear or speak on the phone, you can use Relay UK to make the call by typing. Use the free Relay UK app, or a textphone: dial 18001 first, then the number.
- Website information in another format (accessible PDF, large print, easy read, audio or braille): use HSE's online contact form. HSE replies within 21 days.
- Other languages: HSE publishes translated information in many languages (hse.gov.uk/languages).

KEEP GOING

More free *toolbox talks*

TOOLBOX TALK

Electrical Safety

ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-electrical.html

TOOLBOX TALK

PPE

ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-ppe.html

TOOLBOX TALK

Near Miss & RIDDOR Reporting

ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-nearmiss.html

FREE GUIDE

Health and safety at work

ukworkrights.co.uk/guide-health-safety.html