

12 August 2026**Cancer Council warns tradies of hidden cancer risks on the job**

During Tradies National Health Month, Cancer Council Australia is reminding tradies about the dangers that aren't always visible while on the job.

Being a tradie carries inherent risks, and the burden of work-related cancer is often overlooked. In 2024, 6.7% of deaths from lung cancer in Australia were due to occupational exposures and hazards ([source](#)).

Tradies are the profession most likely to encounter cancer-causing agents on the job, making it essential that everyone on site understands some common workplace cancer risk factors.

Chair of Cancer Council's Occupational and Environmental Cancer Committee, Melissa Treby explains the potential risks and provides some helpful examples of using control measures to reduce risk and work as safely as possible.

Diesel engine exhaust (DEE) emissions

[Diesel engine exhaust](#) is the second most common carcinogen workers are exposed to – with estimates that 1.2 million Australian workers are exposed to it every day.

"Burning diesel fuels contain a mixture of airborne chemicals that when breathed in, can increase the risk of developing long-term health problems, like lung cancer. Tradies often operate or work around heavy machinery or construction and mining vehicles powered by diesel fuel and are at risk of increased exposure," says Treby.

"Signs that diesel engine exhaust may be a problem, include when walls or surfaces are covered in soot, a smoky haze appears while diesel engines are in use, or blue or black smoke is coming from the exhaust."

Treby's advice:

"However, even without signs the risk of Diesel Engine Exhaust remains, and it's important to ensure that appropriate control measures are used. These include remembering not to leave the engine idling if you're not using it, installing devices that reduce emissions and where possible substitute diesel powered engines with electric or gas engines."

Silica dust

Silica is naturally occurring and is found commonly in sand, stone, rock, gravel and clay. It can be contained in materials like artificial stone, benchtops, bricks, tiles and concrete. When these products are cut, ground, drilled or polished the silica is released as fine dust, known as [silica dust](#), which is harmful when inhaled into the lungs. In 2024, Australia implemented a [ban on the use](#), supply and manufacture of engineered stone (which can contain up to 95% silica) to reduce workers exposure to silica dust related diseases.

“Silica dust is extremely harmful when inhaled, and can lead to the development of lung cancer, as well as silicosis, kidney disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Tradies in the mining and construction industries are among those who have the greatest exposure to silica dust,” says Treby.

Treby’s advice:

“Some of the control measures that can reduce your exposure to silica dust include using dust controls like wet cutting, on-tool dust extraction or local exhaust ventilation, wearing properly fitting respiratory protective equipment as required, and avoiding dry sweeping or compressed air for clean-up.”

Asbestos

One in three homes still contain [asbestos](#) in Australia and you can’t tell if something contains asbestos by looking at it. Tradies including plumbers, chippies and sparkies are likely to encounter asbestos at some stage.

“Breathing in asbestos fibres can increase your risk of lung cancer, mesothelioma, asbestosis and other diseases,” says Treby.

Treby’s advice:

“It’s essential to consider and check if asbestos is present before any work begins. Once this is established, tradies should reduce their risk of asbestos exposure by never disturbing materials that may contain asbestos, ensure asbestos removal is carried out by licensed professionals, use appropriate protective equipment when required and follow safe work practices and workplace regulations.”

Welding

The health risks associated with welding comes from the production of contaminants in [welding](#) fumes and ultraviolet (UV) radiation in the welding arc.

“Exposure to these carcinogenic fumes can increase the chances of developing lung cancer, while UV radiation can cause melanoma of the eye,” says Treby.

Treby’s advice:

“It’s important to reduce your cancer risk when welding by limiting your exposure to its fumes and UV light. Some control measures that reduce the cancer risk of welding include removing any paint or coatings before your start. Making sure local exhaust and forced dilution ventilation is used and always wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).”

Wood dust

[Wood dust](#) is produced via woodworking activities including the manufacture of wood products, machine operations, and hand or machine sanding. Tradies who work with pressed wood products such as plywood, particleboard, and MDF also run the risk of formaldehyde exposure, as formaldehyde-based resins are used to glue together the wood fibres. The formaldehyde can then be released into the air when these wood products are worked on.

“Workers who experience prolonged exposure to and inhalation of wood dust and formaldehyde are at potential risk of cancer of the nasal cavity, sinuses and nasopharynx, and leukaemia,” says Treby.

Treby’s advice:

“This exposure can be minimised by using on-tool dust extraction and workshop local exhaust ventilation. Other control measures include wearing well-fitted respiratory protective equipment, keeping work areas clean with safe dust removal methods and using water suppression, when possible, to minimise airborne dust.”

Sun protection

Don’t forget sun safety! It’s essential that everyone working outside uses all five forms of sun protection, with skin cancer the greatest risk factor.

Whenever the UV is 3 or above, Slip on protective clothing, Slop on broad broad-spectrum, water-resistant SPF 50 or SPF 50+ sunscreen, Slap on a broad-brimmed hat, Seek shade and Slide on sunglasses.

Everyone’s obligation

Finally, whatever your day-to-day looks like, employers are required to ensure the health and safety of their workers and others at their workplace. Likewise, workers must take responsible

care of their own health and safety and not negatively affect the health and safety of other people.

“Employers must fulfil their duty to control the risks associated with these silent hazards, and workers should protect themselves and others by following any reasonable instructions and workplace health and safety policies. Always ask your boss or health and safety representative if you’re not sure or have any questions,” says Treby.

-ENDS-

Contact details

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About Cancer Council Australia

Cancer Council Australia is Australia’s leading cancer charity, working to reduce the impact of cancer for all Australians. Cancer Council Australia works with its members, the eight state and territory Cancer Councils to:

- Undertake and fund cancer research
- Prevent and control cancer
- Provide information and support for people affected by cancer
- Shape and influence policy and practice

Find out more at cancer.org.au, or visit our [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), or [LinkedIn](#).