

Fact Sheet 3: Biological hazards

■ Background

Biological hazards can be important sources of ill health in agriculture. Biological agents can be defined as any micro-organism, cell culture, or human endoparasite, which may cause any infection, allergy, toxicity or otherwise create a hazard to human health. These include viruses and bacteria which can cause infection and disease, dangerous plants and animals (for example parasites or insects), biologically contaminated dusts, or wastes from humans and animals.

Most biological agents are micro-organisms, among which are bacteria, viruses, fungi, microscopic parasites, and the microscopic infectious forms of larger parasites.

Agricultural workers may come into contact with these biological agents through routine exposures, such as from contact with animals, animal carcasses, working in or near livestock houses and stabling areas, or contaminated water. Examples include: anthrax, tetanus, bovine tuberculosis.

■ Information

National legislation

There is a wide diversity of approaches in national legislation. Check the summaries provided by your union educator of the applicable laws in your country, and use the law where applicable.

Agreements

Your union may have made collective bargaining agreements with your employer regarding biological hazards. Check if there are any applicable agreements.

ILO Convention No. 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture: Article 14

National laws should ensure that risks such as those of infection, allergy or poisoning are prevented or kept to a minimum when biological agents are handled, and activities involving animals, livestock and stabling areas, comply with national or other recognised health and safety standards.

ILO Recommendation No. 192 on Safety and Health in Agriculture: Paragraph 8

Measures for handling biological agents and for handling animals should comprise:

- risk assessment measures to eliminate, prevent or reduce biological risks;
- control and testing of animals, in accordance with veterinary standards and national law and practice, for diseases transmissible to humans;
- protective measures for the handling of animals and, where appropriate, provision of protective equipment and clothing;
- protective measures for the handling of biological agents and, if necessary, provision of appropriate protective equipment and clothing;
- immunisation of workers handling animals, as appropriate;
- provision of disinfectants and washing facilities, and the maintenance and cleaning of personal protective equipment and clothing;
- provision of first aid, antidotes or other emergency procedures in case of contact with poisonous animals, insects or plants;
- safety measures for the handling, collection, storage and disposal of manure and waste;
- safety measures for the handling and disposal of carcasses of infected animals, including the cleaning and disinfection of contaminated premises; and
- safety information including warning signs and training for those workers handling animals.

■ Trade union action

Collective bargaining

Your union can use collective bargaining to overcome any limitations in your country's health and safety legislation. Encourage your union to develop agreements on biological hazards, using as a basis Article 14 of the ILO Convention No. 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture.

Recommendations on prevention

Worker HS&E representatives will need to ensure that they are effectively consulted about risk assessments. You want to be sure that thorough risk assessments are carried out, procedures developed, and exposure to biological agents prevented or controlled. Use Paragraph 8 of the ILO Recommendation No. 192 above as a basis for consultation with your employer.



Trade union action checklist

- ✓ Identify if you have a problem with biological hazards by doing your own survey or questionnaire with workers that may be affected
- ✓ Do a special HS&E check that concentrates on biological hazards, using the information in this Fact Sheet
- ✓ Decide on the priorities with your members
- ✓ Ask your employer for a copy of risk assessments relating to biological hazards. Remember that a risk assessment is required under the ILO Convention No. 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture
- ✓ Ask your employer for a risk assessment to be done if one has not already been carried out on work involving biological hazards
- ✓ Make sure that you are consulted about potential work involving biological hazards
- ✓ Ensure that the employer's safety policy and systems of work address prevention of risks to workers from biological hazards

