

**NATIONAL  
DOMESTIC  
WORKERS  
ALLIANCE  
DMV**

# **STAY HEALTHY AND SAFE ON THE JOB:**

**A GUIDE FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS  
IN DC, MARYLAND AND VIRGINIA**





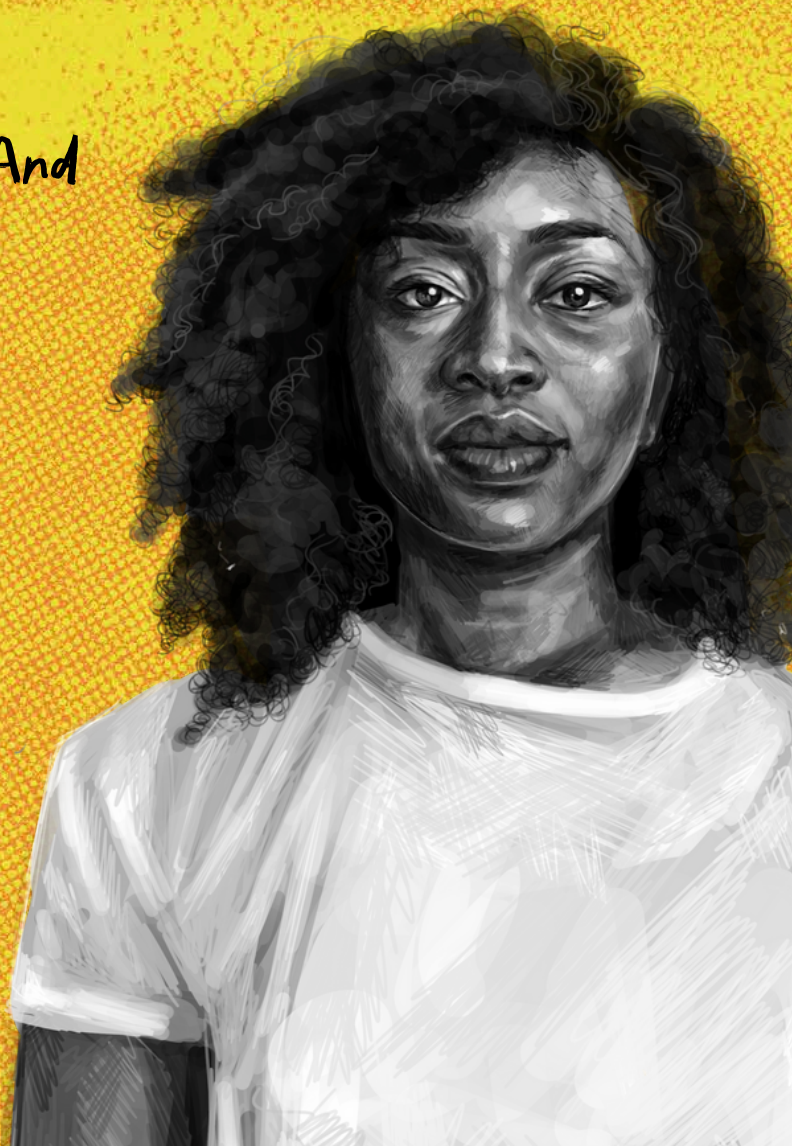
CARE

is the WORK  
that makes all  
other work  
possible.

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"Any irregularity that could  
jeopardize our health or  
safety, we need to speak up  
about it."



# INTRODUCTION



*Does your body hurt after work? Do you notice skin rashes or that you cough more after using cleaning products at work?*

The work we do can impact our body and our health. Our work can cause muscle aches and injuries, skin rashes, eye, nose and throat irritation, and other health effects. To protect ourselves we need to know how to prevent risks to our safety and health at work. Our employers can keep us healthy by providing safe conditions.

This guide will help you identify conditions at work that may cause injuries and provide you with the safety measures needed to protect your health. This guide will help you identify and prevent:

- Muscle aches and pain from all the lifting, reaching, bending, twisting and pushing we do on our jobs;
- Skin, eye and breathing irritation from products we work with;
- Slips and Falls;
- Infections;
- Heat, stress, and other risks to our safety;

We have also included a section on the importance of talking with your employer to improve conditions and a section on your legal rights at work. At the end of this guide we provide you with maps that you can use to better identify risks to your safety and where they occur in your jobs.

# PREVENTING MUSCLE ACHES, PAIN & INJURY FROM WORK

**Housekeepers** spend a lot of the day lifting, reaching, bending, twisting and pushing objects to clean. Making beds, sweeping, dusting, scrubbing, mopping, and cleaning showers, sinks, mirrors, walls, and fixtures can put housekeepers at risk of back and other muscle related injuries such as tendonitis.

**Child care workers** also bend and lift repeatedly during the day, picking up children, toys, laundry and other objects. This repetitive lifting and bending can affect our health.

**Home care workers** that serve seniors or people with disabilities or help clients with the tasks of everyday life (such as helping clients get out of bed, shower or sit in a chair) also have jobs that may require a lot of bending and lifting during the day. These tasks can cause muscle aches and injury.

Muscle aches and injury can be prevented on our jobs. Our jobs can be done safely by following preventive measures. It is important to make sure we are not lifting things that are too heavy; that we can follow the safe lifting practices below when we lift to protect our back, shoulders, arms and knees; that we avoid reaching; and when we use vacuums that we follow the guidelines below.



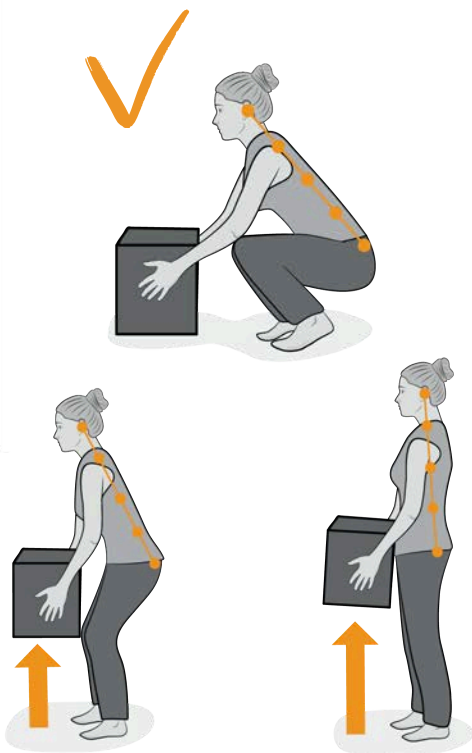
# Actions to Take to Prevent Muscle Pain and Injury

→ When lifting, don't lift baskets of clothes that are too heavy. Break them down into smaller loads to be lifted. This will help prevent back injuries.

→ Follow these safe lifting practices at all times:

Bend your knees when lifting- don't bend at the waist! Lifting from the floor places stress on our backs that can cause muscle pain and injury. To prevent back injuries when lifting from the floor, bend your knees. If you have to lift children or laundry from the floor, be sure to bend your knees while lifting. Don't bend at the waist—bend your knees, and keep the object close to your body while lifting.

Keep loads close to the body when lifting, carrying the load in front of you and close to the body.



# Actions to Take to Prevent Muscle Pain and Injury



Follow these safe lifting practices **at all times:**

When lifting children or objects such as laundry—**carry them at your waist height.**



When making beds, bend at the knees to tuck in sheets—don't bend at the waist.





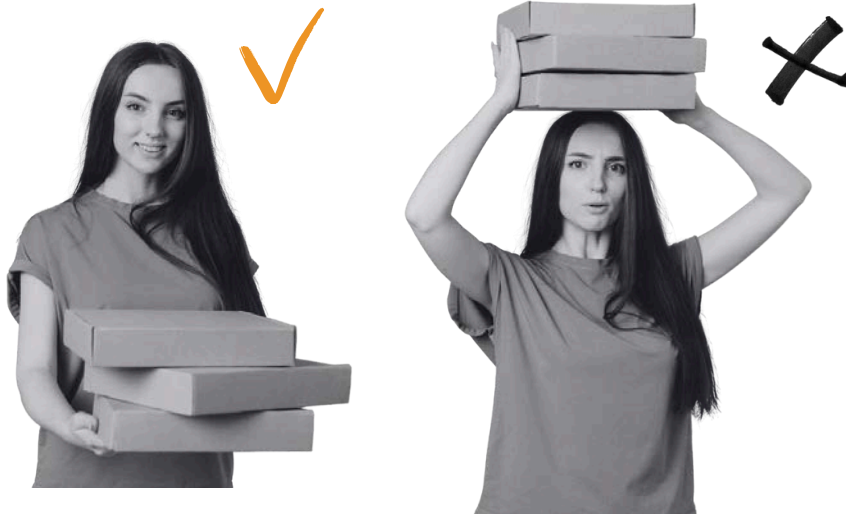
# Actions to Take to Prevent Muscle Pain and Injury



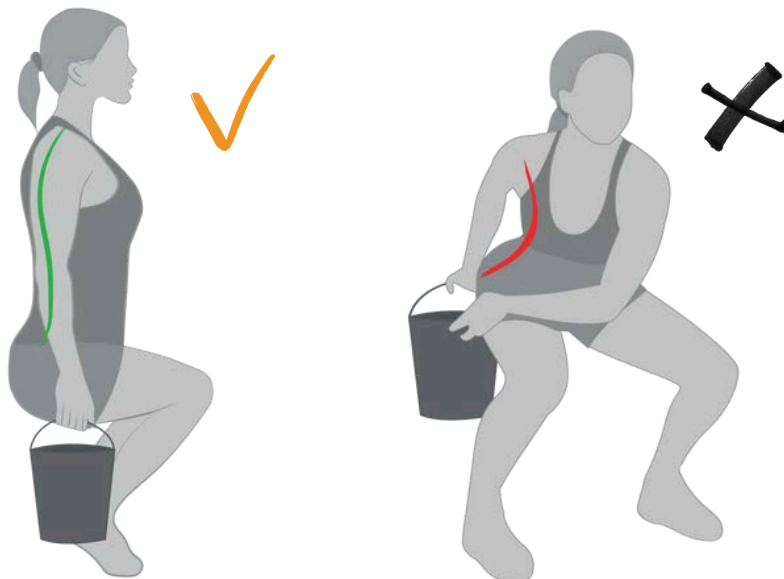
Follow these safe lifting practices **at all times:**

**Don't lift and carry anything over your head**

–this can place stress on the shoulders .



**Avoid twisting while lifting,** this can cause muscle pain.



# Actions to Take to Prevent Muscle Pain and Injury

➔ Avoid kneeling for too long – it can cause pain in the knees.

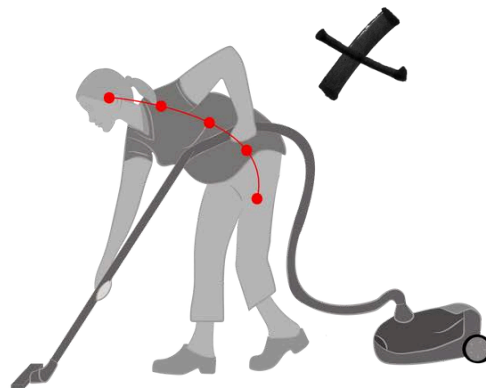
➔ Follow these safe lifting practices **at all times**:

**Avoid reaching when cleaning.** Reaching overhead can cause pain in the neck and shoulders. Employers can provide tools with long handles and step stools to help you reach surfaces that are too high or far away. Never stand on beds, on chairs or tables to reach.

If you need to use a small ladder, ask your employer to provide a ladder that is two sided - a lean to ladder. Never stand on the top step.



➔ **Avoid twisting while vacuuming.** Keep your body lined up with the vacuum cleaner. Alternate vacuuming with right and left hands to rest muscles and body parts. Empty or use new bags frequently to lower the force required to push the vacuum.



## Special Measures for Preventing Back Injuries for Home Care Workers

- ➔ In almost all cases, home care workers should never lift an adult client by themselves. If client lifting is necessary, employers can provide workers with special 'ergonomic assistive' equipment (such as slide boards, slip sheets, rollers, slings or gait belts). Ergonomics is the science of fitting the job to the worker to reduce stress on our muscles and tendons that can lead to painful injuries.
- ➔ Workers will need to be trained on this 'ergonomic' assistive equipment.
- ➔ Equipment such as adjustable beds, raised toilet seats, shower chairs, and grab bars are also helpful for preventing muscle pain and injury among home care workers. This type of equipment keeps the client at an acceptable lift height and allows the client to help himself or herself during transfer when possible.
- ➔ Home care workers can also stay safe by following these client safe lifting procedures:
  - Move along the side of the client's bed instead of reaching while performing tasks at the bedside.
  - When manually moving the client, stand as close as possible to the client without twisting your back, keeping your knees bent and feet apart. To avoid twisting the spine, make sure one foot is in the direction of the move. Using gentle rocking motions can also reduce exertion.
  - Pulling a client up in bed is easier when the head of the bed is flat or down. Raising the client's knees and encouraging the client to push (if possible) can also help.
  - Apply anti-embolism stockings by pushing them on while you are standing at the foot of the bed. You can use less force in this position than standing at the side of the bed.



# PREVENTING HARM FROM CHEMICALS IN THE CLEANING PRODUCTS WE USE

*Products we use to clean houses have chemicals in them. These chemicals may harm our health.*

Some products disinfect -- kill bacteria or microorganisms. Some products clean -- wipe away dirt. And some products do both. But almost all the cleaning products we use contain chemicals. The chemicals can get in our body when we breathe them in as vapors or mists or when we get them on our skin or in our eyes.

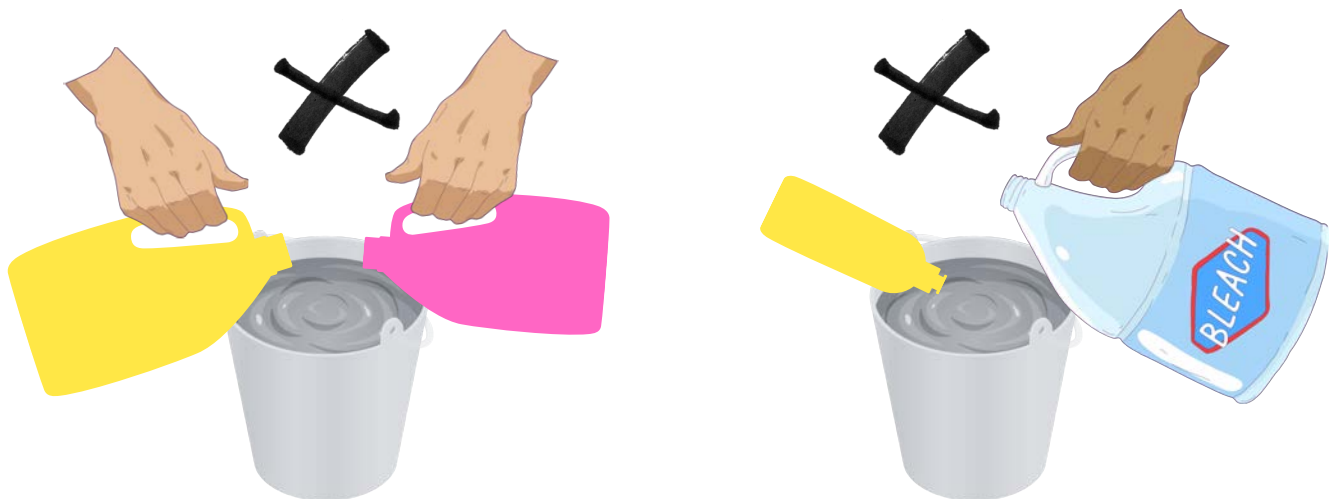


Chemicals can affect our health in different ways, often depending on how much we are exposed to and how often. Some of the chemicals in cleaning products can cause skin rashes and other skin problems. Some chemicals can irritate our eyes, nose and throat and cause dizziness or headaches when we breathe in the vapors and mists. Some may cause asthma. Every person is different and not everyone who breathes in these chemicals or gets them on their skin will experience these effects now or in the future.

Always read the labels on the product you use. Unfortunately, in most states manufacturers don't have to list all the ingredients in the cleaning products we buy at the grocery or drug store. And products that are labeled as 'green' do not necessarily mean they are safer.

The first rule in protecting our health is to **never use two products together or one after the other**. This can produce highly dangerous gasses that can cause serious health effects.

A clear rule to always follow: **never mix any product with bleach with anything else**.



*Never mix cleaning products that contain bleach (also known as chlorine bleach) with any product containing ammonia (such as in glass and window cleaners) because it can produce highly toxic gasses that can cause serious health effects, even death.*



"Always leave the door open. Or, if you need to get the smell out, you can open the windows and close the doors."

In addition to **never mixing cleaning products – especially those that contain bleach** with products containing ammonia:

- Never use two drain cleaners together or one right after another.
- Never mix bleach and vinegar.
- Never mix bleach and alcohol based gels.
- Never mix bleach and rubbing alcohol.
- Never mix vinegar and hydrogen peroxide.
- Never mix baking soda and vinegar.

To protect our health we need to prevent skin and eye contact when using products. We also need to limit the mists and vapors in the air we breathe. Bleach for example contains the chemical sodium hypochlorite. The liquid and vapors from bleach can irritate your skin, eyes, nose and throat.

→ *When using cleaning products:*

Use gloves provided by your employer to prevent skin contact (even for washing dishes).

Spray cleaning products onto rags or sponges – rather than spray them directly on the walls. This will limit the fumes we breathe in.



## → When using cleaning products :

When using products, try to increase the air flow in the room by opening doors and, if possible, open windows. Do not work with cleaning products in enclosed spaces with doors closed.

Turn on the exhaust ventilation when cleaning in the bathroom.



## → To further protect ourselves when using cleaning products:

- Keep all products in original containers.
- Keep containers closed when not in use.
- Keep products out of reach of children.
- Do not use cleaning products to wash hands. Wash hands with regular soap and water before eating.
- Remember that good ventilation (air flow) is important when using cleaning products.
- Know the number for poison control: 1-800-222-1222, who you can call to receive help about poisonous chemicals.
- Read the labels of the products you work with. If you have questions, ask your employer.



## → To further protect ourselves when using cleaning products:

- If the product contains bleach (also known as chlorine bleach) it will usually be on the label. The chemical name for chlorine bleach will also be listed under ingredients: sodium hypochlorite.
- Unfortunately, not all chemicals in cleaning products are listed on the label. Some companies will voluntarily list the ingredients, but many don't. If you have questions, ask your employer to find out what is in the products you are using.
- Some employers are purchasing "green" cleaning chemicals with the expectation that green cleaning products are safer for workers and the environment. However, the word "green" in a name or on a bottle does not ensure that a chemical is safe. Employers should review the cleaning chemicals they purchase, including green cleaning products, to understand their health and safety hazards. Your employer should choose the least hazardous cleaners.



- Ask your employer to provide you with training on what to do if a product spills. These procedures should include providing you with gloves to avoid skin contact when cleaning spills, increase ventilation by opening doors and windows to increase air flow, and if there is the possibility of eye contact, providing you with protective eye goggles.
- If a product gets in your eyes, rinse them with cold water immediately for at least 15 minutes. If irritation persists, seek medical care.



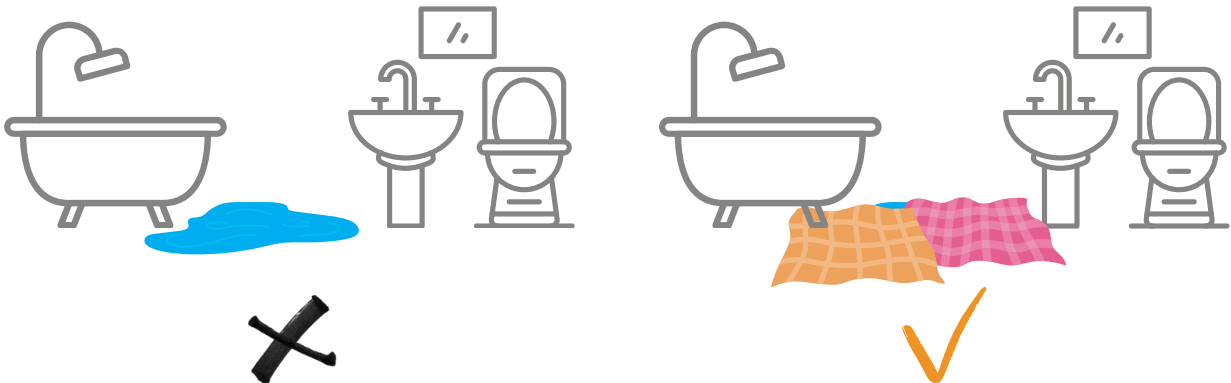
"In the case of cleaning, it's important that when you go to clean houses, you share the products you don't use for your health and safety. I do this; in my case, the bosses/employers buy the products I recommend. It has worked for me. This is important for our work."

# PREVENTING SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS

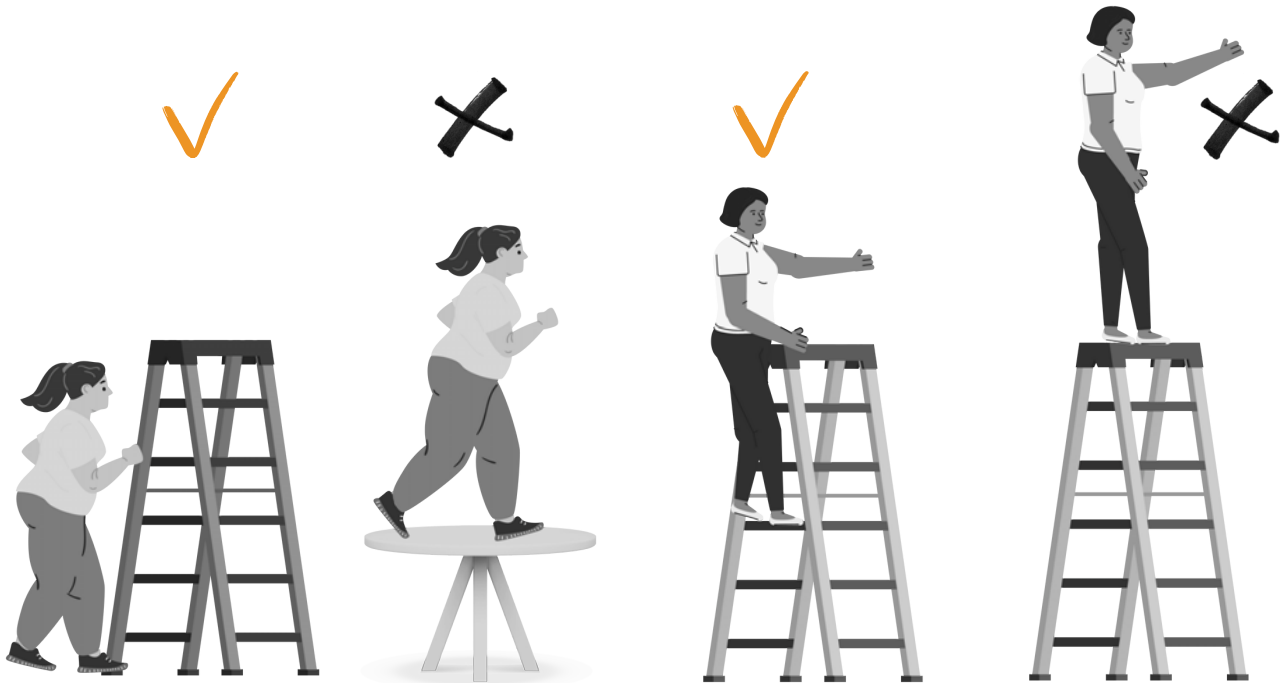
Falls can result in severe injury. Falls can be caused by slipping on wet floors, slipping on icy or snowy steps and driveways/patios, and tripping over toys or other objects left on the floor. Uneven floors can also cause trips and falls.

We and our employers can keep ourselves safe and prevent falls. Here is how:

- Wear non-slip shoes—especially when washing floors. Be aware that wet floors are very slippery, especially bathroom tile floors. Place towels and bath mats on the floor when bathing kids—and make sure the water stays on the towel or bath mat.



- **Never stand on tables or chairs to reach or clean anything. Use step stools or use ladders that are two sided (lean to ladders) and never stand on the top step—always try to stay in the middle. If you need to use a ladder, make sure it is placed on an even surface.** To reach or clean objects that might be close enough to not warrant a step ladder, a low step and sturdy step stool (less than 24 inches) should be provided.



- Ice melt should be used on outside steps and other surfaces to melt the ice
- Wear boots with special non-slip soles to walk outside in the snow or wet weather.
- If there are objects on the floor (toys for example), these can cause you to trip. Have kids put away toys as soon as they are done playing with them. Walk slowly around areas where kids are playing with toys. Small toys are easy to trip on.
- Be aware of walking dogs that are large and may pull you too hard if they see another dog or squirrel. If you don't feel safe walking a dog, let your employer know.

# PREVENTING INFECTIONS

*During cleaning, child care or home care, we can come into contact with bodily fluids or household members that are sick.*

→ *To protect ourselves:*

- Wash hands frequently with hand soap and water. Use hand sanitizers. Wash hands thoroughly after contact with food, changing diapers, or other tasks which involve possible contact with bodily fluids. Disposable gloves can also be used during diaper changes—but be sure to also wash hands thoroughly. (Also wash a child’s hands after changing diapers.) Dirty diapers and wipes should be disposed of in a special diaper pail.



- If your client has an infectious disease such as the flu or COVID, wear a mask –it can help prevent you from catching airborne infections. The best masks are the N 95 or KN95.



→ *To protect ourselves:*

- To prevent infections, wash hands frequently. If disposable gloves are used, be sure to wash hands after taking the gloves off.




- If home care workers are required to use or be around needles that deliver medication, the needle must be provided with safety features that prevent caregivers from being stuck; special containers must also be provided to dispose of needles safely so that you do not come into contact with the needle.
- Talk to your medical provider about the benefits of the Hepatitis B vaccination (and other infectious disease prevention vaccines) if you have not already been vaccinated.



# STRESS

Long and unpredictable hours, often heavy workloads, concerns about job security or poor communications with our employers can cause mental stress. If we feel our employer does not respect our work, or raises their voice when speaking to us, this can all lead to job stress and anxiety. Many domestic workers often experience stress at work, and it can have a significant impact on other aspects of their lives.



Work related mental stress can impact our health. Over time, stress can increase blood pressure, result in poor sleep, and impact our mental health.

Being able to communicate openly with our employers and raise issues of concern is key to reducing job related stress. Having reasonable and predictable hours, and a safe, just and fair workplace is key to reducing the negative impacts of job stress. Further, mutual respect between us and our employer is key to reducing stress.



"Make it clear to employers that respect is mutual and part of the work agreement."





## OTHER HAZARDS

Do not use equipment, like vacuums or toasters, if the electric cords are frayed. All equipment needed to do our job must be in proper working order.

**Bathrooms/Sanitation:** To prevent urinary tract infections, we need to be able to use bathrooms in the homes where we work. Having an employer ask us to use a bathroom in a library or store instead is not acceptable. We also need to have access to drinking water and sinks to wash our hands.

There are also tasks, such as cleaning rodent infestations or cleaning mold on walls from leaks/water damage, that we should not do because it exposes us to serious health hazards.

Cleaning up a pest infestation or mold removal should be done by a professional who specializes in this type of removal.

**Heat/Cold:** Working in temperatures above 80 degrees can cause heat related illness. Stay in the shade during high heat days and bring water with you when outside for more than 15 minutes. Be sure to drink a lot of water if you are outside on a high heat day. Know the early signs of heat exhaustion: dizziness, headaches, sweaty skin, high heartbeat, nausea, weakness and cramps. If you feel any of these early signs, get out of the heat and get help FAST!

When temperatures are below normal and wind speed increases, heat leaves your body more rapidly. Be sure to dress warmly when going outside to work on cold days, dressing in loose fitting layers of clothes to keep the heat in. Wear a hat or hood to keep your whole body warm. Hats reduce the amount of body heat that escapes from your head. If you get wet, come back indoors to dry off. Drink warm liquids to warm up.

## → Workplace violence, Sexual Harassment

Domestic workers should never have to face threats of physical force or sexual threats on the job. But workers are at risk of harassment and violence on the job, sometimes by employers or other members of the family, including if they provide care for clients with dementia or other issues which may cause them to behave unpredictably or aggressively; or if there are aggressive animals they encounter in or near the home.

Our employers must make sure there is zero risk of violence or harassment on the job. If someone in the house has a history of disruptive or aggressive behavior, the employer must put in place a plan to assure all domestic workers are safe. Discuss with employers any history of disruptive or aggressive behavior of those you may work with or are near, and how your safety will be assured.

Employers should talk to all household members about the importance of always communicating in a respectful tone to workers and keeping a professional relationship. In addition, dogs or other animals that may pose a risk to workers should be kept in an area that is separate from workers.

Many workers are not familiar with dogs. Even if the dog is not aggressive, this lack of experience can create worry and fear among workers. Employers should train domestic workers on how to best interact with dogs—including how to talk to the dog and how to give the dog treats/food.

## → Workers' Compensation

In Washington, DC or Maryland if you are injured on your job, or become ill because of conditions on your job, you may have the right to medical care for your work related injury or illness and you may be provided some replacement for lost wages. In DC and MD, your household employer must pay for workers' compensation insurance to cover medical care and a part of lost wages for any covered injuries you sustain on the job. If you want to know whether or not you are entitled to workers' compensation, we recommend that you seek legal advice to learn about your rights.

## → First Aid and Emergency Preparedness

It's important that every house you work in has a first aid kit or first aid supplies for small injuries that may happen. Make sure you are told by the employer where they keep the first aid kit and also make sure they have posted and you know the number for emergency services to call an ambulance or police.

## → Importance of Communication with Your Employer

It is very important to make clear that mutual respect must be part of the job.

Before we start a job, it's important to review expectations, job duties, hours, and pay. Having predictable hours and times when we work every week is very important. Further, we need to have input into the tasks to be accomplished and the products used. If responsibilities are to be increased, this should be negotiated first with the employer. This will help prevent future health problems and injuries related to products, excessive workload and pace of work.

Domestic workers in Washington DC have won the legal right to have a written contract with their employer. Both the federal Department of Labor and the DC Department of Employment Services have published sample written contracts that domestic workers can use with their employers. Those sample contracts can be found on the [Department of Labor Website](#) and the [DC Department of Employment Services Website](#).

The written contract document must specify the weekly schedule including days of the week, start time, end time and number of hours per week; rate of pay; the duties to be performed; and for live in domestic workers, a description of the type and value of lodging provided, time of sleep period, and a personal time allotment. Additional language can be agreed upon by domestic workers and their employers and added to the contract. For example, a domestic worker could ask for the contract to include an agreement that the employer will address workers' concerns about safety promptly, including concerns about possible workplace violence, or that the employer will pay for additional sick days beyond what is required under DC law, or additional paid time off not covered under paid sick days. When there is a risk to our health and safety or a concern we have, we need to be able to communicate this when the situation arises. If you can communicate immediately with your employer, that is best. If not, ask for a meeting as soon as possible.

## → Importance of Communication with Your Employer

It is very important that your employer communicate with you in a language you understand.

You can receive support about how to communicate with your employer from the DC, Maryland and Virginia (DMV) Chapter of the National Domestic Workers Alliance: 202-524-3835 or DC@domesticworkers.org.

## → Know Your Rights

Domestic workers are covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act. That means you must be paid the minimum wage in your state for all hours worked. In 2024, the minimum wage for DC is \$17.50; in Maryland the minimum wage is \$15.00; and in Virginia the minimum wage is \$12.00 (There is a very limited exemption from paying the minimum wage for domestic workers employed by a household to provide companionship services for the aged or infirm less than 20 hours a week or for casual babysitting that is irregular and intermittent.)

Most domestic workers are also covered by the overtime provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act. This means you must be paid overtime at time and a half your regular rate of pay for all hours worked over 40 in a workweek. There is an exemption from overtime pay for domestic workers who live in the employer's home.

## → Independent Contractor vs Employee:

Some household owners incorrectly call workers “independent contractors” when they are actually employees. It is important for you to know the difference between the two because employees are legally entitled to the minimum wage and other benefits (including workers compensation payment for work related injuries and unemployment insurance). Independent contractors are not covered by minimum wage laws, overtime, workers compensation, paid sick days, unemployment insurance or other employment laws.

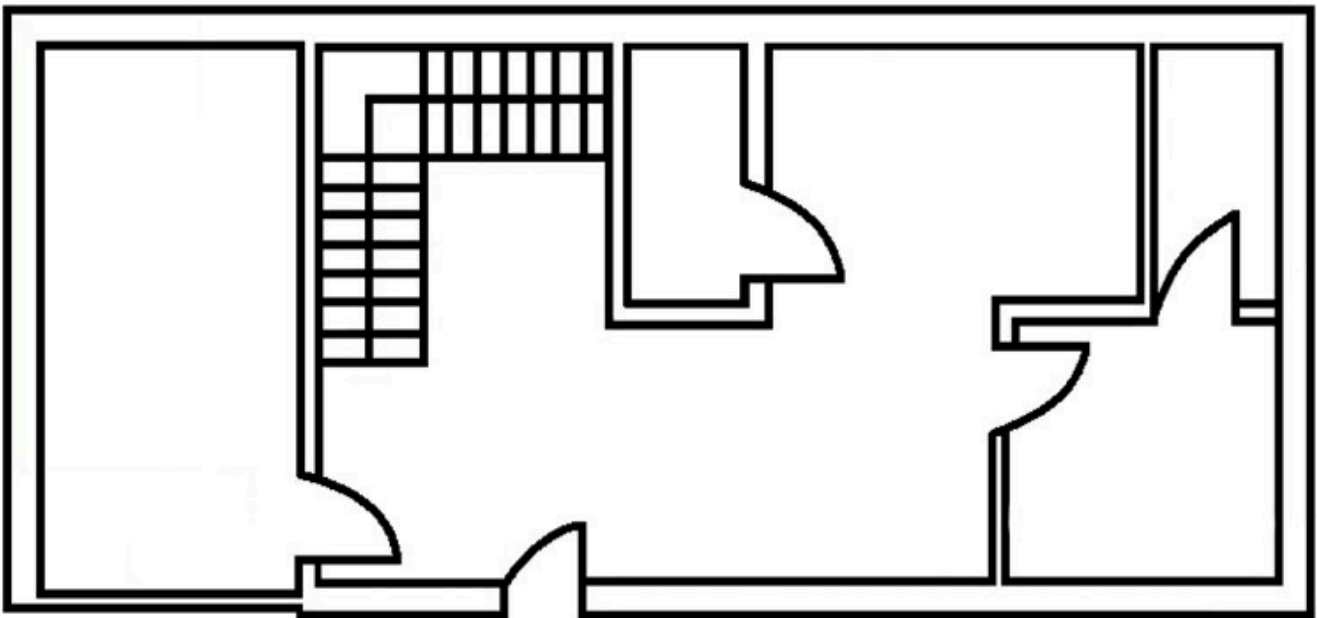
A homeowner may call you an independent contractor, or give you an IRS form 1099 instead of a W-2, but this does not automatically make you an independent contractor.

If you have questions, contact the DC, Maryland and Virginia (DMV) Chapter of the National Domestic Workers Alliance at 202-524-3835 or [DC@domesticworkers.org](mailto:DC@domesticworkers.org).

# TOOLS TO USE TO HELP IDENTIFY HAZARDS: MAPPING

## → Mapping to Identify Possible Unsafe Conditions

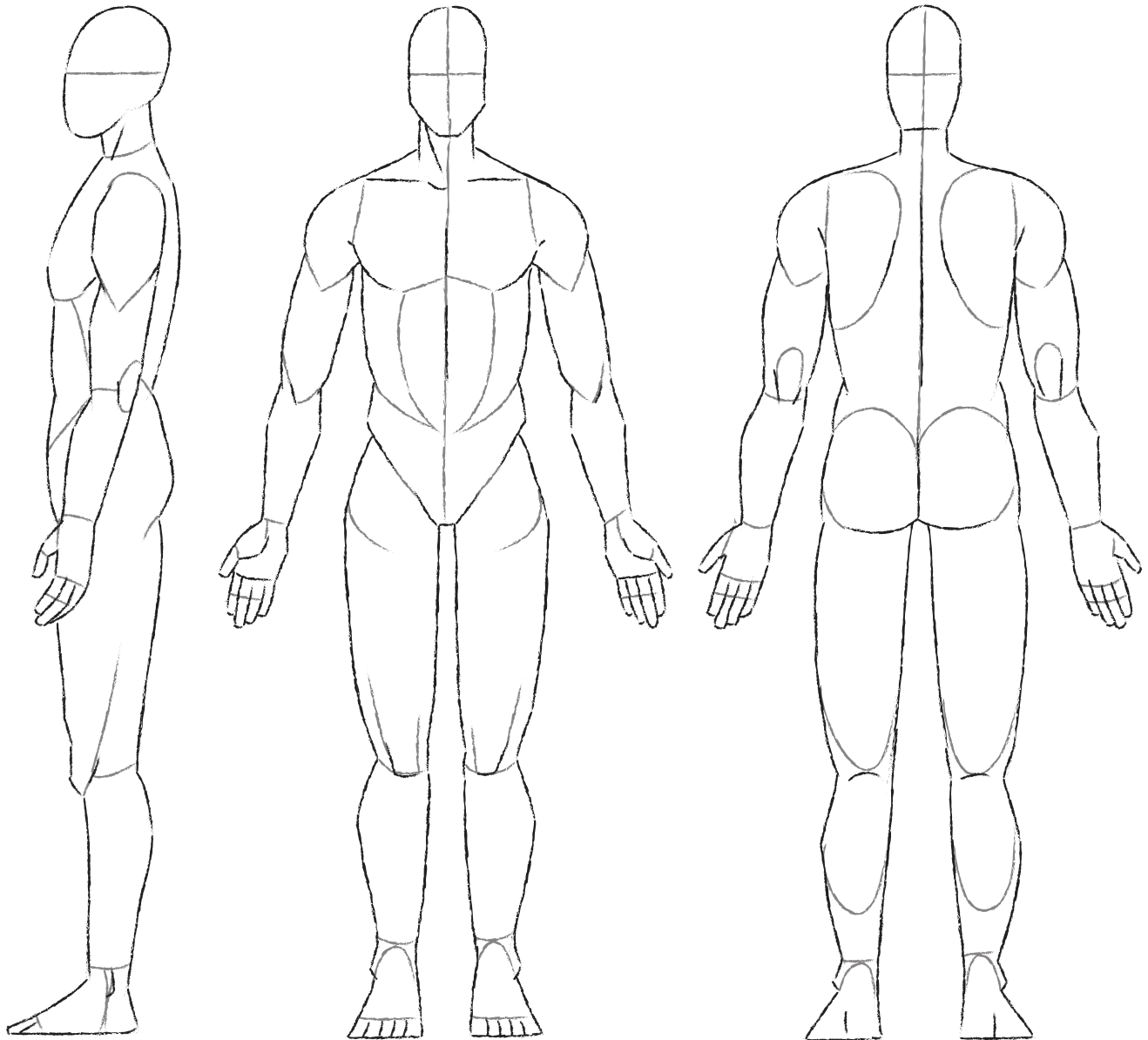
To help you identify risks to your health and safety on the job, we provided a sample workplace. Can you identify areas where hazards and unsafe conditions exist based on your experience? No one knows more about hazards and concerns on the job than you, because you face them every day. Label where potential hazards are (for example where you use products, where you lift, where you reach, slipping/fall risks).





## Mapping the Impact of Unsafe Conditions on Our Bodies

A body map is a map of the impact of unsafe conditions on our bodies. Identify areas of the body that have experienced health effects from our jobs. Where do you experience, for example, muscle pain, health effects from using cleaning products, effects of slipping or tripping?



## → Acknowledgments

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