



5 CRUCIAL QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE ALLOWING WORKERS INTO A CONFINED SPACE

Confined spaces are dangerous places to work. In an ideal world, nobody would. However, there are many jobs that require confined space working which cannot be avoided. In this case, it is essential that a risk assessment has been performed beforehand. This is not only a legal requirement; it will also enable the worker to take all the necessary mitigating actions to reduce risk to “as low as reasonably practicable (ALARP)”. There are five crucial considerations to keep in mind:

1. WHAT ARE THE GENERAL CONDITIONS OF THE CONFINED SPACE?

It may sound obvious, but the first step should always be to identify all the risks – both major and minor – that may be present in a confined space. These can include typical atmospheric risks such as chemical residues, toxic gases or oxygen deficiency/enrichment. Physical risks, however, can also arise from the confined space’s specific dimensions and layout so, for example, always ask yourself: are workers at risk of falling from a height?



2. WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE WORK-RELATED RISKS?

Knowing the general conditions of a confined space is important, but alone is often not enough. You also need to consider what sort of tasks will be undertaken in that space and whether this may lead to further risks. Cleaning chemicals, for example, could interact with the confined space's atmosphere and make it impossible to breathe. Potential sources of ignition, such as welding, should be identified and the requirement for hot or strenuous work activity assessed in case it could affect a worker's thermal comfort and fatigue levels, and therefore their susceptibility to risk.



3. WHAT'S HAPPENING OUTSIDE?

Risks can also come from outside a confined space so it is vital to keep an eye on the surroundings. Typical risks include contamination from adjacent plant, gas mains or surrounding land or ingress of substances such as liquids, steam, water or raw materials from nearby processes and services. Even an external event such as a power cut affecting ventilation may suddenly put workers inside a confined space at risk.



4. WHAT CHANGEABLE RISKS ARE THERE?

There can also be changeable risks, for example fluctuating gas concentrations or water levels suddenly rising as a result of heavy rain. These are – by definition – difficult to predict, which is why they require a 'dynamic' risk assessment. This means setting a range of permitted conditions within which the job can proceed. Outside that range, work stops and the formal assessment is repeated.



5. WHAT IS NEEDED IN CASE OF AN EMERGENCY?

Rescue operations in confined spaces can be especially dangerous so any specific risks that rescuers may face in an emergency situation should also be factored in. This is key to determining the equipment and safety measures that will be needed and the time spent on rescue. Remember: ensuring the rescuer's safety is critical to a successful rescue so all of the necessary precautions should be taken, even if this means a longer rescue time.



For more information on assessing the risks associated with confined space download our 'Technical Guide – How to meet your obligations to protect workers in confined spaces' [here](#).

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