

OSHA Requirements for Safety Signage



Safety signs can warn about hazards, set clear expectations and promote mindful employee behavior. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's general duty clause requires employers to provide a workplace free from recognized hazards. Signs, tags and labels are one of the many ways employers make workplaces safer for their employees.

Learn about safety signage rules and ways to comply with OSHA's guidelines.

Signage requirements for all employers

Whether your business is in an office or a manufacturing facility, you must display the “Job Safety and Health: It’s the Law!” poster. Hang the sign in an unobstructed location where all employees can easily read it (like a breakroom). If you have a multilingual staff, the poster must be in a language they can understand.

[OSHA offers free copies of the poster](#), including multiple translations, on its website.

Signal words instantly indicate the severity of a hazard

OSHA uses classifications, or “signal words,” to indicate the severity of a hazard. They are intended to capture the employee’s immediate attention. Signal words are included on a chemical’s safety data sheet and label, but may also appear on signs. You can only use one signal word per SDS, label or sign. They include the following classifications:

- **Danger** indicates the most serious hazards. They mean serious injury or death is almost certain if you don’t avoid the hazard. Take precautions and follow the safeguards on the sign. The sign must include “DANGER” in white letters on a red background.
- **Caution** indicates a minor nonimmediate injury is possible if you don’t avoid the hazard. The sign should be yellow or predominantly yellow and include “CAUTION.”
- **Warning** indicates a serious injury could occur if you don’t avoid the hazard. Warning indicates a hazard level that falls between danger and caution. The sign should be orange or predominantly orange and include “WARNING.”
- **Biological hazard (aka biohazard)** indicates infectious agents presenting a risk or potential risk to the well-being of man. The sign should be predominantly fluorescent orange or orange-red with lettering and symbols in a contrasting color and include “BIOHAZARD.” Red bags or red containers may be substituted for labels.

Safety symbols must precede the signal words and lettering on the signs.

Signal words, colors and symbols used on signs

Most signs describe a hazard and ways to avoid the hazard. A single symbol or word rarely does both.

OSHA created guidelines for several signs, using words and symbols to communicate specific hazards.

- **Biological hazard (biohazard) signs are fluorescent orange or orange-red.** They identify equipment, containers, rooms, materials, experimental animals or combinations of these that contain (or are contaminated with) viable hazardous agents. According to OSHA, biological hazards or biohazards include “only those infectious agents presenting a risk or potential risk to the well-being of man.” You can read more about biohazards at [OSHA’s Bloodborne Pathogens standard](#).
- **Caution signs are on a yellow background with black lettering.** It indicates a potentially hazardous situation that may result in a minor injury or to caution against unsafe work practices. They warn against hazards capable of resulting in severe, but not irreversible, injury or damage. Caution signs may also alert against unsafe practices that could cause property damage.
- **Danger signs are red, black, and white.** Danger signs have the signal word “DANGER” in white letters at the top on a rectangular safety red background. They indicate immediate and grave danger, usually requiring special safety precautions. They also indicate hazards capable of producing irreversible injury or property damage and a prohibition against the activity.
- **Emergency instruction signs are white with a green upper panel with white lettering.** Instructive text on the lower panel is in black lettering. They instruct employees on an emergency process (like first aid). They look similar to posters.
- **Exit signs are red or green.** They show the location of the nearest exit using an arrow. Do not use an arrow if the exit path continues straight ahead. Exit signs with a symbol of a person and an arrow pointing toward the exit should make the person and the arrow face the same direction.
- **Fire and emergency signs have a signal word in white on a red background.** They point to fire extinguishing equipment, fire escapes and exits, gas shut-off valves, sprinkler drains and lifesaving equipment, like defibrillators.
- **Informational signs display “NOTICE” in white on a blue background in the upper panel.** They provide general information to avoid confusion or misunderstanding. The lower panel is white with additional wording or symbols in blue or black. Alternatively, the entire sign may be white letters on a blue background.
- **Safety instruction signs are on a white background with a green panel and white lettering.** They provide notices about health, first aid, medical equipment, sanitation, housekeeping and general safety. OSHA notes that any lettering on the white background should be black.
- **Slow-moving vehicle (SMV) emblems are fluorescent yellow-orange triangles with dark red reflective borders.** They identify vehicles that move slowly (25 mph or less) on public roads. Emblems are not clearance markers for wide machinery, nor do they replace required lighting or markings on SMVs. They should be highly visible and reflective for day or nighttime use.

The materials used to manufacture safety signs matter

According to OSHA, all signs must have rounded or blunt corners. They must not have:

- Burrs
- Projections that create hazards

- Sharp edges
- Splinters

The fastening devices you use to hang signs (like bolts, nails or screws) aren't hazardous unless they protrude to create a physical hazard to employees.

Rules related to sign visibility and distance

OSHA has rules to make sure signs are visible and readable.

- Signs, signals and barricades must be visible while work is performed. Only remove or cover them when the hazard no longer exists.
- The signal word on a sign (“DANGER” or “CAUTION”) must be readable from a minimum of 5 feet. If the hazard is more than 5 feet from the sign, it must be readable from a distance that suits so employees have enough warning.
- You must illuminate a sign if there is not enough light to read it easily.

Select signs based on the job hazards in your business

Your signage needs will vary based on the workplace hazards and types of jobs your employees do. Conduct a hazard analysis and review OSHA's specifications before purchasing signs. Always defer to OSHA's [accident prevention signage and tags](#), and its [signs, signals and barricades](#) standards. In the absence of guidelines, use the following:

- **American National Standards Institute** — [OSHA standard 1910.6](#) requires accident prevention signs and physical hazard markings to be equal to or better than the [American National Standards Institute standards](#) cited in subparts 1910.6(e)(59), (66) and (67).
- **Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways** — [OSHA 1926.6](#) requires flaggers to use the signals and wear the safety garments described in Part 6 of the [Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways](#), Temporary Traffic Control.

Stay in compliance and model safety

Staying compliant is essential. But safety signs also show you care about your employee's well-being. Lead by example and model safe behaviors by:

- Performing job hazard assessments annually
- Investigating all safety incidents and near-misses
- Remaining vigilant about safety protocols

- Rewarding safe behaviors
- Encouraging employees to speak up when they see hazards on the job, including missing signs and tags
- Providing a workplace free from fear and retaliation

A safe workplace increases morale, reduces employee turnover and helps control workers' compensation rates. Review OSHA's [environmental control specifications for accident prevention signs and tags](#) for more detailed information.

Workplace safety starts with you. Be a role model for safety and engage your employees through safety signage.

Sahouri Insurance

advocacy@sahouri.com

Sahouri Insurance

8200 Greensboro Dr

STE 1550

McLean, VA 22102

www.sahouri.com



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