

Risk = likelihood of occurrence x severity of outcome

Since risk is dependant on the likelihood of harm occurring, as well as the severity of the harmful outcome, it can be categorised qualitatively using a matrix like the one below.

Use your judgement to decide the likely outcome of an accident and the probability of the accident occurring. This matrix will then help you decide how significant the risk is. Bear in mind that the outcomes of accidents are largely unpredictable, so it's best to concentrate on the probable rather than the possible.

		Severity of outcome		
		Slightly harmful (Minor injury)	Harmful (Longer term or lasting over 3 days)	Very severe (Death or major injury)
Likelihood of occurrence	Very likely	High	Very high!	Extremely high!
	Likely	Medium	High	Very high!
	Unlikely	Low	Medium	High
	Highly unlikely	Insignificant	Low	Medium

Notes

Remember that the likelihood of an incident occurring also depends on;

- the number of people involved;
- how often the process takes place;
- human factors such as recklessness, or being rushed for time.

The overall risk rating will also depend on the personality of the risk assessor, as different people perceive risks differently. This doesn't necessarily affect the order of priority when it comes to implementing control measures though, provided the judgment criteria are consistent. For example, someone who always over-estimates, will do so for all risks that they judge, meaning that the order of priority for action would be the same as for someone who sees each risk as lower.

Prioritising action

Categorising risk is important to help concentrate action on dealing with the riskiest activities or processes. Once the level of risk has been established, the guide below can be used to decide the order of priority for further action to reduce the risks.

Risk level	Action priority	Timescale
Extremely high!	Unacceptable risk. Requires immediate attention and/or cessation of activity until action to reduce risk is carried out.	Immediate
Very high!	Unacceptable risk. Requires immediate attention and/or cessation of activity until action to reduce risk is carried out.	Immediate
High	Urgent. Requires attention as soon as possible. If necessary stop activity until action to reduce risk is carried out.	Immediate
Medium	Requires action. To be dealt with as soon as possible after high priorities.	Within 2 weeks
Low	Action if necessary. Where action is possible, without significant costs or difficulty. To be dealt with after medium priorities.	Within 1 month
Insignificant	No action required. No need to record as part of risk assessment.	-