



## Protecting the Health and Safety of Working Teenagers

HARRIET RUBENSTEIN, M.P.H., J.D., MARNA R. STERNBACH, M.D. MCP, AND SUSAN H. POLLACK, M.D.

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 See related patient information handout on [working teenagers](https://www.aafp.org/afp/1999/0801/p587.html) (<https://www.aafp.org/afp/1999/0801/p587.html>), written by the authors of this article.

**More than one third of high school students work during the school year, and many more are employed during the summer months. Teenage workers face a variety of health and safety hazards. Occupational injury and illness are largely preventable, and family physicians can play a crucial role in this prevention effort by advising adolescents about common workplace dangers. Physicians who sign work permits and provide ongoing health care to teenagers should counsel them and their parents or guardians about the benefits and risks of work and discuss the regulations governing jobs that are prohibited for adolescents, work hours, protective measures and workers' compensation benefits.**

An estimated 200,000 workers between 14 and 17 years of age experience job-related injuries annually, and some 64,000 of these workers require treatment in emergency departments.<sup>1</sup> When adjusted for differences in the number of hours worked, the nonfatal injury rate for adolescent workers exceeds that for adults.<sup>2</sup> In addition, approximately 70 adolescents younger than 18 years die in work-related incidents each year.<sup>1</sup>

Work is a common feature of adolescent life in the United States, with more than 5 million children and teenagers legally employed. In addition, several million adolescents work in violation of wage, hour and safety regulations.<sup>3</sup> Limited youth employment data are available at the national or state levels, but the Bureau of Labor Statistics conservatively estimates that 35 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds were employed in 1995.<sup>1</sup> High school surveys suggest that about 80 percent of students are employed at some time during their high school years,<sup>4</sup> and that nearly 18 percent of them work at least 20 hours per week during the school year.<sup>5</sup>

Teenagers enter the workplace in after-school and summer jobs or in school-based work experience programs. Most work in the retail trades, notably in restaurants and grocery stores.<sup>4</sup> Students in vocational schools enter simulated workplace environments, such as auto-body repair shops and construction sites.

# Benefits and Risks of Work

Employment provides the potential for many benefits to teenagers, including opportunities to earn money for themselves and their families; gain valuable time management, interpersonal and occupation-specific skills; develop discipline and responsibility; and enhance self-confidence and self-esteem.

Work also poses potential threats to the physical, emotional, economic and academic health of teenagers. Like their adult co-workers, teenagers face exposure to a variety of health and safety hazards that can lead to injury and illness ([Table 1](#)).

TABLE 1

## Common Hazards for Teenage Workers

<b>Type of work</b>	<b>Potential hazards</b>
Sales clerk, stock clerk, bagger, cashier	Heavy lifting, cutting tools, repetitive strain, violent crime
Cook, waiter, dishwasher, counter or kitchen worker	Hot cooking equipment, slippery floors, sharp objects, heavy lifting, hot grease, cleaning solutions
Delivery worker*	Motor vehicles, bicycles, violent crime, weather
Landscaper, gardener, agricultural worker	Pesticides, ultraviolet (UV) exposure, heat stress, power machinery, heavy lifting, tractors, falls, noise
Construction worker	Falls, heavy lifting, blunt trauma, UV exposure, temperature extremes, electrocution, trench caveins, noise, lead, asbestos
Janitor or cleaner	Cleaning chemicals, violent crime, heavy lifting
Health care or nursing aide	Infectious agents, heavy lifting, cleaning chemicals
Child care provider (day care, baby-sitting, camp)	Heavy lifting, infectious diseases

\*—Occupational operation of a motor vehicle is illegal for workers younger than 18 years.

Occupational injuries can cause working teenagers to lose time from school, recreational and social activities, and work itself. Musculoskeletal injuries, particularly back injuries, may cause permanent impairment, and traumatic injuries can have serious physical and emotional sequelae. Little is known about the long-term effects of exposure to toxic chemicals and their possible contribution to the development of cancer, reproductive disorders or chronic diseases in adulthood.

Injury and illness are not the only risks to teenage workers. Working students juggle class time, homework and family, social, religious and civic activities with the demands of their jobs. A recent study of high school students found that working 20 hours or more a week during the school year is associated with higher levels of emotional distress, more substance abuse and earlier onset of sexual activity than are experienced by students working less than 20 hours a week or not at all.<sup>5</sup>

The developmental characteristics of adolescents, combined with workplace risk factors, may increase their vulnerability to injury and illness. Working teenagers may be physically unable to correctly use tools and equipment designed for the average adult male or may lack the strength to perform a job safely. Even physically mature adolescents may lack the emotional maturity or judgment necessary to perform a particular work assignment without injury.<sup>6</sup> The failure of many employers to provide young workers with safety training,<sup>7</sup> combined with adolescents' desire to meet the expectations of supervisors, their unwillingness to ask for assistance and their characteristic risk-taking behaviors, may increase their risk of injury.<sup>8</sup>

## Regulatory Issues

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Act and equivalent state statutes guarantee workers of all ages the right to a safe and healthy workplace by regulating specific hazards and requiring employers to provide information and training to avoid workplace dangers.

The primary federal law governing the employment of workers younger than 18 years is the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The FLSA child labor provisions are designed to protect minors by restricting the types of jobs they may hold, for safety reasons ([Table 2](#)), and the number of hours they may work, for educational reasons ([Table 3](#)). Despite the potentially serious hazards of farm work, the FLSA provides less stringent protection for teenagers working in the agricultural setting than for those in nonfarm employment, and permits the children of farmers to perform any job at any age on their family farm.

## Some Jobs Prohibited for Working Teens

### **No worker younger than 18 years may:**

Drive a motor vehicle as a regular part of the job, or operate a forklift

Operate many types of powered equipment (e.g., circular saw, box crusher, meat slicer, bakery machine)

Work in wrecking, demolition, excavation or roofing

Work in mining, logging or sawmills

Work in meatpacking or slaughtering

Work where there is exposure to radiation

Work where explosives are manufactured or stored

### **No worker aged 14 or 15 years may:**

Bake or cook (except at a serving counter)

Operate power-driven machines, except those that pose little hazard (e.g., office machines)

Work on a ladder or scaffold

Work in warehouses

Work in construction, building or manufacturing

Load or unload a truck, railroad car or conveyor

*Information from federal Fair Labor Standards Act, available at: [http://www.dol.gov/dol/esa/public/whd\\_org.htm](http://www.dol.gov/dol/esa/public/whd_org.htm). (Many states have stricter standards that take precedence over these.)*

### TABLE 3

## Permissible Work Hours for 14- and 15-Year-Olds\*

### **Time of day**

Outside school hours

Labor Day to June 1: 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

June 1 to Labor Day: 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

## **Maximum work hours**

Up to 3 hours on a school day

Up to 18 hours in a school week

Up to 8 hours on a nonschool day

Up to 40 hours in a nonschool week

*\*—Workers age 16 years and older have no restrictions on hours of work.*

*Information from federal Fair Labor Standards Act, available at: [http://www.dol.gov/dol/esa/public/whd\\_org.htm](http://www.dol.gov/dol/esa/public/whd_org.htm). (Many states have stricter standards that take precedence over these.)*

Individual states also have child labor laws. Where the provisions of state laws conflict with those of the FLSA, the stricter standard applies.

## The Role of the Family Physician

Work-related injuries and illnesses are largely preventable. Family physicians can help their adolescent patients avoid these occupational hazards through appropriate office-based interventions.

## OFFICE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Many states require minors to obtain employment certificates, also known as “working papers” or “work permits,” from school authorities before seeking or starting a job, in an effort to ensure that employment does not compromise the young workers' health, safety or academic performance. In states where a physician must certify fitness for duty before a work permit is issued, the office visit is the ideal time to discuss work-related issues. However, because many employers hire teenagers without work permits and because some states do not require them, nearly any encounter with an adolescent patient (e.g., school, sports, camp and driver's license physicals, family planning visits) should be taken as an opportunity to inquire about work and promote a healthy attitude toward job safety and health.

The physician may wish to offer input into the job choices made by adolescent patients, especially those with special health needs. For example, teenagers with asthma or cystic fibrosis should be counseled to avoid work environments with tobacco smoke. The employment-related provisions of

the Americans with Disabilities Act may help adolescents with disabilities obtain the accommodations necessary to participate in the workforce.

Recognizing that many demands compete for the limited time available in a patient encounter, the following framework is suggested. Physicians are encouraged to selectively pursue the most relevant of the following areas with working adolescent patients ([Table 4](#)).

TABLE 4

## Occupational History for the Teenage Worker

1. What exactly do you do at work, including overtime and occasional tasks?
2. What tools, equipment and machinery do you use at work?
3. What chemicals do you use at work?
4. Do you work alone?
5. Is there an adult supervisor present in your work area?  
  
Have you received any training in how to perform your job safely, including training related to emergency situations (e.g., escaping a fire, handling potentially violent customers, seeking help if injured)?
6. Has your employer given you any protective equipment (e.g., gloves, safety shoes, hard hat, mask, goggles) to wear on the job? Are you using this equipment? (If not, why?)
7. Are you aware of basic first aid measures (e.g., treatment for burns, strains, sprains)?
8. What hours do you work?
9. Do you have time to eat between school and work? Do you have meal breaks during work hours?
10. How much time do you spend each day on homework? Are you also involved in family, social, religious and community activities?
11. How many hours of sleep do you get on school nights?
12. Have your grades changed since you started working? Have you chosen easier courses since you started working?
- 13.

## INQUIRE ABOUT THE SPECIFICS OF THE JOB

The physician should determine the teenage patient's job tasks, responsibilities and exposures ([Table 1](#)) and consider these when formulating differential diagnoses and addressing medical management.

At least 38 percent of adolescent work-related deaths are associated with illegal work activities.<sup>2</sup> The physician who learns that the patient's job duties or hours violate wage or hour rules should be alerted to the additional possibility of health and safety violations. At a minimum, the physician should advise the patient that the work is illegal and may be dangerous, understanding that the young worker may nevertheless need the job and that other options may be scarce. With the teenager's consent, the physician should include parents or legal guardians in this discussion.

Even legally permitted work may pose potential hazards, and the physician should counsel the young worker accordingly. [Table 5](#) presents some information resources for the physician and the patient.

TABLE 5

## Resources for Job Safety and Health Information

### **Agency/organization**

### **Telephone number/Web site**

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

Educational Resource Centers offer continuing education and technical assistance. Download or request copies of NIOSH Alert *Preventing Deaths and Injuries of Adolescent Workers* and patient information handout *Are You a Working Teen?*

800-35-NIOSH (356-4674)  
<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh>  
(<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/>)

Occupational Safety and Health Administration, U.S. Department of Labor

800-321-OSHA (6742)  
<http://www.osha.gov> (<http://www.osha.gov>)

Wage and Hour Division, U.S. Department of Labor (administers FLSA)

800-959-3652  
[http://www.dol.gov/dol/esa/public/whd\\_org.htm](http://www.dol.gov/dol/esa/public/whd_org.htm)

State Department of Labor

See blue pages of telephone book

Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics

202-347-4976  
<http://www.aoec.org> (<http://www.aoec.org>)

Children's Safety Network

Request copy of *Protecting Working Teens: A Public Health Resource Guide*

617-969-7100, ext. 2207

**Agency/organization****Telephone number/Web site**

American Academy of Pediatrics

847-228-5005

Request copy of *Injury Control for Children and Youth*<http://www.aap.org> (<http://www.aap.org>)

Child Labor Coalition

202-835-3323

<http://www.stopchildlabor.org/>  
(<http://www.stopchildlabor.org/>)

National Child Labor Committee

212-840-1801

<http://www.kapow.org> (<http://www.kapow.org>)*FLSA = Fair Labor Standards Act.*

## ASK ABOUT WORK HOURS

The FLSA only regulates the hours of work for 14- and 15-year-olds, although state laws and regulations may cover older teenagers. The physician can play an important role in protecting the adolescent from the hazards of excessive work hours by asking about time available for homework and other activities. When necessary, the physician should encourage the patient to modify work t and priorities.

Teenagers and others who work during the early morning or late evening, especially in retail trade or service establishments such as gasoline stations, are at increased risk for assault and should be encouraged to ask their employers to adjust their hours. Working alone in these situations increases the risk and, at a minimum, teenagers should be encouraged to refuse to work alone during these hours.

## DISCUSS PROTECTIVE MEASURES

Protective gear such as gloves, hard hats, safety shoes, goggles or respiratory protection may be necessary for some jobs; this necessity usually signals exposure to hazardous substances. This type of exposure is prohibited for teenagers, except in supervised educational environments such as vocational-technical programs. Even then, these exposures remain a health and safety hazard. Drawing on some of the same strategies used when advising teenagers to wear bicycle helmets, physicians should encourage adolescent workers to ask for and use safety equipment on the job.

## REVIEW LEGAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

[Table 6](#) summarizes some of the most essential occupational health and safety rights relevant to teenagers and provides information resources. Frequently overlooked is the right of teenagers who suffer a work-related injury or illness to receive workers' compensation benefits for medical and rehabilitation expenses and, in some cases, lost wages. Eligibility and benefits vary from state to state. Teenage workers and their parents or guardians should be advised of this right and of the strict time limits for providing the employer with notice of the injury and filing a claim.

TABLE 6

### Legal Rights of Working Adolescents

#### **Legal right**

A safe workplace

Compensation for medical and rehabilitation expenses and lost wages if injured on the job

Minimum wage and overtime pay

Freedom from workplace discrimination and sexual harassment

#### **Sources of information\***

Occupational Safety and Health Administration

State Bureau of Workers' Compensation

Wage and Hour Division, U.S. Department of Labor

Equal Employment Opportunities Commission; state human relations or fair employment agencies

\*—Telephone numbers can be found in the blue pages of your local telephone book.

### Author Information

HARRIET RUBENSTEIN, M.P.H., J.D., is an assistant professor of environmental and occupational health in the School of Public Health and an assistant professor in the Department of Community and Preventive Medicine in the School of Medicine at MCP Hahnemann University, Philadelphia.

MARNA R. STERNBACH, M.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Family Medicine in the School of Medicine at MCP Hahnemann University.

SUSAN H. POLLACK, M.D., is an assistant professor in the departments of Pediatrics and Community and Preventive Medicine, and the Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center at the University of Kentucky, Lexington.

Address correspondence to Harriet Rubenstein, M.P.H., J.D., Center for Environmental and Occupational Health, School of Public Health, MCP Hahnemann University, 1505 Race St., MS-660, Philadelphia, PA 19102. Reprints are not available from the authors.

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