

# Safer storage and distribution

An essential guide for warehouse operators



## Best practice safety solutions to protect your business

Warehousing and distribution are the backbone of British business, powering essential retail, manufacturing, food distribution, and e-commerce activity. The industry thrives on pace and productivity, combining tight turnarounds and high turnover with a range of critical safety risks – from vehicle hazards to manual handling.

As a result, the warehousing and distribution sector faces some of the UK's most significant safety challenges. The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) **2025 transportation and storage statistics** reveal injury rates considerably higher than the all-industry average. Warehousing has a non-fatal injury rate of around 2.4-2.5%, compared to 1.7% across all sectors.

- Slips, trips, and falls (32%), manual handling (21%), and being struck by a moving object (13%) were the leading causes of non-fatal injuries across the transport and storage industries.
- Fatal injuries were caused by being struck by a moving object (27%), being hit by a moving vehicle (27%), and falling from a height (16%).

Tougher sentencing laws and high-profile prosecutions have placed warehousing safety in the spotlight. In June 2025, the Sentencing Council released new guidelines – aimed explicitly at Very Large Organisations (VLOs) – for health and safety, food safety, food hygiene, and corporate manslaughter offences.

The amendments empower courts to issue fines in proportion to a company's financial standing and the seriousness of the safety breach. While the changes target organisations with turnovers in excess of £50 million, the move signals stricter regulatory scrutiny for businesses of all sizes – and potentially harsher fines for health and safety offences.

With a complex mix of compliance considerations, the warehousing and distribution sector is particularly vulnerable. This white paper puts you back in control, tackling your site's most common risks – including racking systems, workplace transport, and working at height – with smart technology and cost-saving safety solutions.



## Understanding health and safety law

Warehouse operators are subject to a series of health and safety regulations. The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 provides the foundation for safe working environments, equipment, and practices, while related legislation covers manual handling, hazardous substances, and incident reporting.

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, organisations must proactively manage risk and implement appropriate measures to protect their workers. As an employer, you're legally required to identify hazards, take steps to control them, and train your team to work safely.

### Risk assessments

A risk assessment **identifies safety issues across your business, prompting targeted solutions to prevent them.** The assessment should pinpoint hazards – such as unstable racking, faulty equipment, or poor lighting – and evaluate who could be harmed by them.

With risks identified, the next step is to **determine how issues could be resolved or mitigated through training, safe systems of work, and physical controls.** Where hazards can't be eliminated, they should be reduced to an acceptable level. Risk assessments should be updated whenever processes or layouts change. In a warehouse environment, safety concerns are typically associated with:

- Manual handling, including lifting, pushing, and pulling
- Forklift and vehicle movements
- Slips, trips, and falls
- Racking safety and falling objects
- Loading and unloading practices

### Training

Once you've detected your site's risks and implemented appropriate controls, **your team needs the tools to work safely.** Every employee – from floor staff to management – should be trained to recognise hazards, understand basic health, safety, and emergency procedures, and know how to perform their specific role without risk of illness or injury.

### Key training topics might include:

- Health and safety awareness and reporting
- Forklift operation and refresher training
- Preventing slips, trips, and falls from height
- Manual handling techniques
- Supervisor training on managing safety
- Safety-focused onboarding for agency and temporary staff

### How Opus can help

*Our risk assessment, training, and consultancy services ensure your health and safety strategy aligns with evolving sector legislation. An Opus warehousing specialist will guide you through relevant industry regulations, identify gaps in your existing protocols, and shape flexible, tech-enabled programmes to achieve consistent compliance.*

## Tackling your top sector risks: Manual handling

While every site has unique safety concerns, several common compliance issues cut across the warehousing and distribution sector. The following guidance helps your team detect and deal with routine site risks, weaving accountability and hazard awareness into their daily workload.

Manual handling is a catch-all term for any action involving lifting, carrying, pushing, pulling, or moving objects. It's a core component of on-the-job safety and a key contributor to musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), the UK's number two cause of work-related ill health.

A simple three-step methodology can guard against injuries and recurring MSDs, preventing costly claims in the event of an accident:

### 1. Avoid

Your goal is to avoid manual handling altogether. Before transporting any load using physical means, ensure it can't be moved **using mechanical or automated handling systems**. Start with these questions:

- Does the load **genuinely need to be moved**, or can it be **relocated through stock rotation** or layout changes?
- Can it be **shifted without hands-on contact** – for example, by using conveyors, pallet trucks, or forklifts?
- Could you use **mechanical and automated handling aids**, such as order-picking equipment, vacuum lifters, or goods lifts?

### 2. Assess

If manual handling is unavoidable, carry out a comprehensive risk assessment. Examine the job from start to finish, ticking off the following safety considerations:

- **The task.** Has it been clearly defined and demonstrated? What type of physical movement does it demand, such as lifting from racking, twisting in picking aisles, or handling loads at floor level?
- **The working environment.** Are there blind spots, trip hazards, or restricted access areas? Think about narrow aisles, loading bays, mezzanine floors, or vehicle movements.
- **The load.** Is it heavy, bulky, unstable, or difficult to grip, such as shrink-wrapped goods, awkward cartons, or uneven pallets?
- **Individual capacity.** Do your employees have existing health and/or physical limitations, and are agency or temporary workers adequately assessed and trained?
- **Organisation of the activity.** Can the effort be shared or staggered – for example, through team lifts or task rotation?
- **Pace.** Can the task be completed safely and carefully within the available time, without pressure from pick rates or delivery schedules?
- **Frequency.** Does the operation involve repetitive actions, such as continuous picking or packing tasks across a shift?
- **Duration.** Could the job cause injury or strain over a sustained period, particularly during long shifts or peak trading periods?

## Tackling your top sector risks (continued)

### 3. Reduce and control

Where risks remain, minimise injury through safe systems of work, mechanical aids, and good warehouse design. These key questions will help create an informed plan for every job:

- Can manually operated handling aids be used, such as pallet trucks, roll cages, trolleys, or lift tables? If so, do your workers know how to use them effectively?
- Could the load be modified or broken down into smaller bundles, for example by split picking or reduced carton weights?
- Can the load be pushed rather than pulled, particularly when using roll cages or pallet trucks?
- Could the environment be changed to cut risks? This might mean reconfiguring racking layouts, reducing carry distances, improving lighting, or maintaining floor surfaces.
- Do workers need PPE to supplement other controls – for example, safety footwear, gloves, or back supports?
- Have staff been trained to understand manual handling risks, use aids, and employ correct handling and lifting methods?



## Tackling your top sector risks: Working at height

Falls from height remain the leading cause of fatal job-related accidents, accounting for over a quarter of deadly injuries.

To protect your team, zero in on hazards with a tailored work-at-height risk assessment and follow up with comprehensive safety measures to avoid accidents and fatalities.

- Always **aim to eliminate the need to work at height**. For example, consider whether tasks such as stock picking, maintenance, or inspections can be redesigned to be carried out from ground level.
- Where work at height is unavoidable, **provide stable, purpose-built access equipment** to reduce the risk of falls. Assess your site in detail, reviewing where work at height takes place and the specific risks in each area. This may include pallet racking, mezzanine floors, order-picking areas, loading bays, vehicle access, and trailer work.
- Look out for **environmental factors that could increase the risk of an incident** while working at height, such as slippery floors, poor lighting, uneven surfaces, weather exposure at loading areas, and restricted space.
- With every task, **ensure proper planning**, use of fall-protection equipment, staff training, and safe access systems, such as scaffolding, guardrails, and safety nets.
- Confirm staff can **safely access and exit all work-at-height areas**. Employees should also be protected from falling objects, such as stock and tools.
- **Remove the need for workers to overreach**, climb racking, or stand on unsuitable or fragile surfaces, including roof lights or damaged decking.



## Tackling your top sector risks: Workplace transport

With pedestrians and workplace transport sharing the same space, the warehouse environment presents significant collision and crushing risks.

A high proportion of onsite traffic accidents are caused by forklifts, loading activities, and reversing vehicles, so it's essential to act on hazards with appropriate safety controls.

- Segregate pedestrians and vehicles with **clearly defined traffic routes, physical barriers, floor markings, and signage**, particularly where pedestrian walkways cross forklift or HGV routes.
- Train drivers on **safe vehicle and forklift operation**, focusing on warehouse-specific hazards, including blind corners, racking ends, narrow aisles, reversing, and speed control.
- Enforce **safe loading and unloading procedures** at loading bays, docks, and yard areas, using trained signallers (or banksmen) to guide drivers during reversing, coupling, or trailer movements where needed.
- **Ask visiting drivers to report to warehouse reception** or your gatehouse for an overview of your site layout, traffic rules, speed limits, pedestrian routes, and emergency arrangements.
- Maintain vehicles and machinery through **planned preventative maintenance**, including pre-use checks, prompt repairs, and regular inspections and servicing.
- **Assess where vehicles reverse on your site**, particularly forklift trucks, yard shunters, and HGVs. Evaluate whether **one-way traffic systems or drive-through loading bays** could eliminate the need for reversing.
- Where reversing is unavoidable, **ensure adequate control measures are in place**. These may include reversing alarms, flashing beacons, mirrors, cameras, and proximity sensors to warn drivers and pedestrians.
- If you have routes that step into traffic movement – for example, from offices, welfare facilities, or picking areas – **use robust signage, barriers, and controlled crossing points** to protect pedestrians.
- **Minimise interaction between workers and vehicles** wherever possible by separating shift start times, restricting access to vehicle areas, and enforcing designated walkways.
- **Never allow warehouse drivers to operate forklift trucks with their vision obscured** – for example, by oversized loads, raised forks, or poor stacking practices. Where visibility is restricted, require operators to travel in reverse or use a banksman.
- Mandate that restraining systems are used for every task. **Make seat belt use compulsory** and encourage drivers to buckle up through toolbox talks, incentives, signage, and staff training.

## Tackling your top sector risks: Slips, trips, and falls

Slips and trips are the top cause of workplace injuries in the UK, representing 30% of non-fatal incidents. Warehouse workers are often caught out by slippery floors, uneven surfaces, and trip hazards like loose strapping and discarded pallets.

Safeguard your team with a simple programme of housekeeping, monitoring, and maintenance:

- **Audit your site for surface hazards** in racking aisles, mezzanine floors, loading bays, and external yard areas, paying particular attention to flooring, lighting, obstructed walkways, protruding machinery or display units, and trailing cables.
- Establish **regular housekeeping and maintenance schedules** and teach workers to deal with spills and stray stock immediately, especially during busy picking periods, shift handovers, and peak seasonal demand.
- **Improve lighting and signage in high-risk areas** and install non-slip flooring where needed, such as dock edges, battery-charging areas, and goods-in/goods-out zones.
- Train employees to **avoid risks and report hazards to management** – including near misses.
- Give staff the required tools, training, and time to **keep your site clear and uncluttered**. This includes supplying a sufficient number of bins and storage facilities and encouraging your team to clean as they go – even during time-pressured picking or loading tasks.
- Plan workflows and storage to **keep pedestrian and traffic routes clear of obstructions**, with clearly marked walkways and designated temporary storage areas for pallets, roll cages, and returns.
- Ensure your spot checks and clean-up routine **tackle common warehousing dangers**, including loose packaging and shrink wrap, forklift charging cables, and conveyor supports.
- Provide **suitable slip-resistant safety footwear** as needed – and regularly check for wear and damage.
- **Review slip and trip risks after layout changes**, racking reconfiguration, or the introduction of new equipment, processes, or automation.

### How Opus can help

*We work across the warehousing and distribution industry to help operators reduce accident risks, cultivate stronger safety cultures, and take a proactive path to compliance.*

*Our customised health and safety programmes support your unique safety goals and challenges, offering one-off risk assessments, end-to-end services, and ongoing partnerships.*

## Six steps to a stronger pallet racking system

Pallet racking systems deliver a range of benefits to your warehouse, from streamlining stock management to increasing storage capacity. However, without proper installation, checks, and compliance measures, these structures can pose serious safety threats.

Use these top tips to raise your racking safety standards:

- 1. Correct installation.** Your pallet racking framework should be fitted by a qualified specialist with solid experience of your specific type of system. During construction, quality companies will ensure the space is evenly levelled and that structures are firmly fixed to the ground. When choosing a supplier, feel free to review their credentials and customer feedback for extra peace of mind.
- 2. Regular checks.** Each part of your racking system plays a role in retaining the structure and keeping it safe for use. Routine inspections of the upright frames, beams, pallets, locking pins, and wired decking will identify and solve problems quickly and easily. The HSE recommends three types of assessments to stay on top of possible pitfalls. These include immediate reporting of damage and defects, frequent visual inspections, and 'expert' audits carried out by a competent person.
- 3. Protective netting.** Fixing a wired net or steel mesh around the exterior of your racking system prevents stock from falling to the ground and posing a potentially lethal crushing risk. To reduce hazards further, take care not to overcrowd shelves or push goods through the rear of the racking when positioning loads.
- 4. Column guards.** Vehicle impacts – including minor forklift bumps – weaken the integrity of your racking system and can render it unfit for use. By adding column guards, you can avoid direct hits to your framework and reduce the risk of a structural collapse. Available in a range of options, from disposable foam wraps to permanent floor-mounted steel protectors, these high-visibility safety solutions alert drivers to warehouse collision hazards and help them steer clear of uprights and legs.
- 5. Safe ways of working.** Train your team on responsible warehouse working methods, covering compliant transport and loading and unloading practices. You should only ever use pallets that are compatible with your particular racking system and ensure staff are competent in approved pallet and stock management. This includes understanding the importance of visible loads, stable stacking heights, and safe shelf capacity.
- 6. Open communication.** Encourage your workers to take a leading role in your warehouse's safety culture, proactively identifying and immediately reporting damage to pallets or racking systems. In turn, management should swiftly investigate and rectify safety issues – and reward employees' commitment to compliance.

## Cost-effective compliance: Saving money across multiple sites

As your warehousing business grows, so does the challenge to run a cost-effective health and safety programme. Without a coordinated multi-site plan, individual site managers fulfil key tasks on a 'one-off' basis across different suppliers, price points, and schedules – duplicating effort and expense, while losing the benefit of shared best practice.

The following strategies help you achieve immediate savings – and establish a sustainable approach to health and safety going forward:

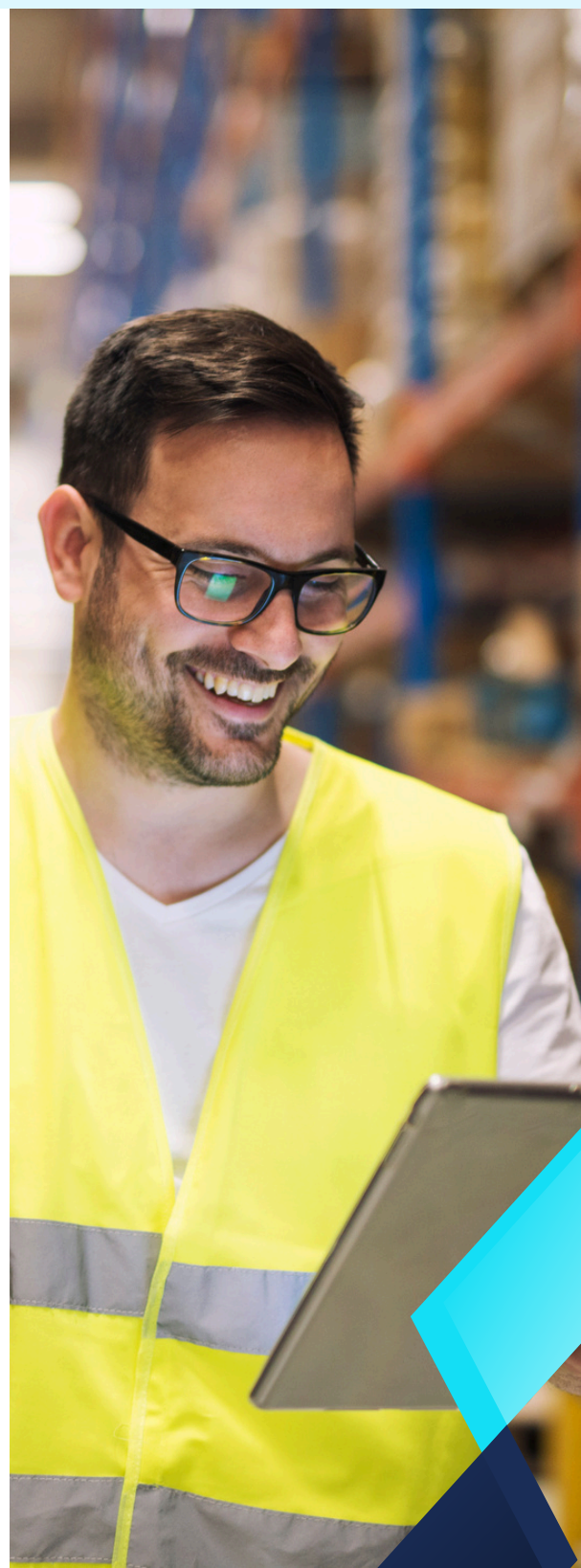
- **Take staff training online.** Replace expensive multi-site training sessions with simple e-learning modules, sharing the key elements of manual handling, racking awareness, and workplace transport. Opus Compliance Cloud's online courses upskill staff while keeping costs low and messages consistent across every site. Training for higher-risk activities may require further guidance and should be assessed separately.
- **Pay for only one set of inspections.** Statutory checks of work equipment, including forklift trucks under LOLER requirements, should be completed by one provider. Don't allow your own insurers and the forklift supplier to double up on inspections, as you'll pay twice too. Simplify the process by assigning one company to carry out the task.
- **Purchase PPE centrally.** To reduce spend, bulk-buy personal protective equipment (PPE), such as gloves, jackets, and shoes. Check stocks regularly to maintain a steady supply across all warehouse sites and avoid the hit of fast-track delivery. Shop around for the best deal, as gathering quotes from different suppliers could also save you money.
- **Reduce your testing frequency.** Don't pay for annual inspections you don't need. Schedule portable appliance (PA) testing and Fixed Electrical Inspections (FEIs) at approved intervals, rather than automatically booking once each year. An FEI can be completed every three to five years and PA testing for desktop computers and VDU screens can be conducted every five years, provided the items undergo regular visual checks. However, hardware that's used often or regularly exposed to the elements, such as portable hand tools, may require testing every six months.
- **Standardise policies, risk assessments, and procedures.** Avoid each site creating its own documents from scratch. Use a cloud-based compliance management system to store a core document catalogue – including policies, risk assessments, and safe systems – that can be lightly tailored to each location. This centralised approach improves consistency, cuts management time, and makes audits and inspections easier to manage across multiple warehouses.

## Work-saving software: Transforming standards through technology

Ad hoc employee training and old-school admin methods – such as spreadsheets and paper files – can lead to critical knowledge and information gaps, ramping up risks to workers and productivity.

Online compliance management gives you the 24/7 tools and resources to run a robust, scalable safety programme. Platforms like Opus Compliance Cloud automate every element of compliance and deliver complete visibility across areas where warehousing businesses often fall short.

- **Accident prevention.** Successful safety management relies on an end-to-end view of compliance performance. Online safety management captures all H&S activity and identifies recurring problems, allowing you to implement effective controls and proactively reduce accident rates.
- **Data and documentation.** Placing your safety data in the cloud creates a single source for compliance documentation and policies, so you can be confident that all staff are working from the same current, date-stamped versions. Details of workplace accidents and near misses are securely stored and instantly retrievable when required, meaning due diligence trails are ready and waiting in the event of an incident.
- **Compliance tasks.** In a fast-paced warehouse environment, Compliance Cloud's proactive features ensure you never miss a target or KPI. Routine tasks – from risk assessments to racking inspections – are delegated and dealt with in a few clicks. If a deadline passes, the system triggers an auto-alert so critical assessments, audits, and equipment checks are constantly monitored and never missed. Results are shared online with senior managers, highlighting issues at executive level and strengthening long-term safety strategies.
- **Staff training, engagement, and accountability.** An online approach simplifies employee upskilling with a complete catalogue of e-learning modules within immediate reach. A cloud-based system provides an instant view of training requirements and milestones, with auto-reminders to eliminate missed deadlines. Employees take ownership of their own safety knowledge, boosting engagement, vigilance, and accountability.





## The safer way forward for your warehouse

At Opus, our experienced team understands what makes a robust, audit-ready health and safety programme.

Every day, we help warehousing businesses prevent workplace incidents and elevate performance. Our comprehensive safety, training, and occupational health services improve outcomes, streamline protocols, and avoid the penalties of poor compliance.

To discuss your safety goals with a warehousing and distribution sector specialist, please get in touch.



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