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Young Workers at Risk

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Background

Young workers, less than 18 years of age, are an essential and expanding part of the workforce. Work can be a valuable experience for youth that provides the opportunity to learn important job skills and to explore career fields. It also increases self esteem and teaches independence, responsibility, interpersonal skills and money management.^{1,2}

Working can also have negative consequences. Each year in the United States, 60-70 teens die from work-related injuries. Hundreds of young workers require hospitalization and tens of thousands require hospital emergency room visits.³ Working long hours during the school year has been associated with behavioral problems such as drug and alcohol use, lack of sleep, decreased academic performance, and decreased educational attainment.^{1,2}



Connecticut

In Connecticut, there are over 179,000 youth between the ages of 14-17.⁴ Many of these teens work. In 1999, 50% of 16-19 year olds were working and accounted for 5% of the total civilian work force. There are no statistics regarding the percentage of 14-15 year olds that work.⁵

In Connecticut, during the last nine years (1992-2000), eight youth died on the job (see Table 1).⁶ Few data are available about young workers and work-related injuries and diseases. Two sources of young worker data are the Connecticut Worker's Compensation

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Table 1
Young Worker Deaths in Connecticut, 1992-2000⁶

- 1992: A 16 year old newspaper deliverer was hit by a car.
- 1993: A 17 year old gas station attendant was killed while changing a tire when it exploded.
- 1995: A 16 year old farm worker drowned.
- 1995: A 16 year old died after ingesting or inhaling an anesthetic drug while working in a veterinary hospital.
- 1998: An 11 year old newspaper carrier was abducted and murdered while delivering papers.
- 1999: A 16 year old ride attendant at an amusement park was crushed when he became pinned under the moving frame of the ride which he was attempting to board while it was in motion.
- 2000: A 16 year old was crushed to death when the truck he was underneath to work on was moved by the driver.
- 2000: A 17 year old tree worker was killed when the metal blade guard on the wood chipper he was operating ejected and struck him in the head.

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Commission (WCC), which is based on information from the employers' first report of injury forms, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is based on a survey of a sample of Connecticut companies' OSHA 200 logs.

In Connecticut, there is a statutory requirement for all physicians to report known and suspected cases of occupational disease. However, only Department of Labor funded occupational medicine clinics are required to report occupational injuries. Very few disease and injury reports are submitted for workers under the age 18. This is most likely because a young worker would typically seek care from their pediatrician or family physician rather than an occupational medicine physician. A pediatrician or family physician may not be aware of the reporting requirements or not recognize an illness as being occupationally related. To expand the data available in Connecticut, the Department of Public Health (DPH) is seeking to identify sentinel physicians who are willing to report occupational injuries sustained by young workers. Please contact DPH for further information.

Where do teens work?

"In general, the restaurant industry and other retail businesses rank high among U.S. industries for risk of adolescent injuries."⁷

Nationally, many young workers are employed in retail and service industries. These industries include restaurants, grocery stores, department stores, gas stations and offices.¹ In Connecticut, WCC data show that the majority of youth who were injured on the job were employed in eating and drinking establishments, general merchandise stores, amusements and recreation services, health services and public administration (state and local government).⁸

What are the common injuries?

In the United States, an estimated 200,000 young workers aged 14-17 are injured on the job each year. Common injuries sustained by these young workers include lacerations, contusions, abrasions, sprains and strains, burns, and fractures or dislocations.¹ 1998 data from the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) showed that workers between

15-17 years of age had rates of burns ranging from 2- to 10- fold higher than for older workers. Burns and lacerations accounted for 50% of the injuries for workers less than 20 years of age compared to approximately 25% of injuries for workers 20 years of age and over.⁹

Analysis of the Connecticut WCC data shows that cuts and lacerations, back injuries, and burns are common injuries among the state's youth.⁸ Teens in Connecticut may also be at risk for developing occupationally related diseases such as contact dermatitis, work aggravated or new onset asthma, carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis, various chemical/heavy metal poisonings, and infectious diseases. These injuries and disease conditions may have long term health effects.¹

Why do young workers get injured?

Young workers are at risk for injury because they lack experience, training and maturity, as well as lacking knowledge of their rights, injury prevention and workplace hazards. Young workers also are hesitant to ask questions or to say "no" to a potentially hazardous task. Physical differences such as height and strength when compared to adults also put young workers at risk.¹

Even though state child labor laws are in place to prohibit workers less than 18 years of age from hazardous types of jobs, young workers may be working in prohibited occupations or performing illegal tasks. Some studies have shown that 19-41% of injuries treated in emergency rooms involved youth working in illegal jobs.¹

How can health care providers help?

Everyone has the right to work in a safe and healthy workplace. Work related injuries and diseases are preventable. During a patient care visit, health care providers have an opportunity to advise teen patients about a variety of health

topics including occupational health. If a teen visits your emergency room, clinic, or office for a well-visit or for an injury or an illness, ask him/her about his/her employment. See Table 2 for some talking points.



Table 2 Talking to Teen Patients about Work¹⁰

- **Ask your teen patients whether they work and if so, where.**
- **Ask if they have ever been injured at work.**
- **Ask how many hours they work in a week.**
- **Discuss whether the number of hours interferes with school and other activities.**
- **Ask about work tasks.**
- **Ask if they have been trained about possible hazards at work and how to protect themselves.**
- **Encourage your patients to follow safety rules at work.**
- **Encourage your patients to tell someone (parent, boss, older co-worker) if they encounter a problem at work.**

For more information about teen workers, please refer to the agencies listed in the resource section on page 4. For more information about reporting occupational diseases or injuries, please contact DPH at 860/509-7744.

References

1. NIOSH. *Promoting safe work for young workers: A community based approach.* Publication No. 99-141, November 1999.

2. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. *Protecting youth at work.* Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1998.

3. NIOSH Update. *Teen worker fatalities in diverse industries show importance of injury prevention efforts.* June 26th, 2000. <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/teenfatl.html> (29 June 00)

4. Census 2000 Summary file 1 (Connecticut)/prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2001.

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Keeping Connecticut Healthy

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 John G. Rowland, Governor
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TO:

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5. Connecticut Department of Labor, Office of Research. *Geographic Profile of Employment and Unemployment*, 1999.
6. CONN-OSHA, Occupational Safety and Health Statistics Unit, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI) data.
7. NIOSH Update. *Most teen worker injuries in restaurants occur in fast food, NIOSH study finds*. December 22, 1999. <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/teenfast.html> (15 June 01).
8. Connecticut Workers' Compensation Commission, Statistical Division, Employers First report of injury data, January 1997–September 1998.
9. CDC. "Nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses treated in hospital emergency departments-United States, 1998". *MMWR*, 50 (2001), 313-17.
10. Connecticut Department of Public Health, Division of Environmental Epidemiology and Occupational Health. *Protecting working teens: A guide for health care providers*. May 2001.

Resources

Questions about wages or child labor laws:

Connecticut Department of Labor,
 Wages and Workplace Standards Division
 (Enforces state child labor laws) 860/263-6791
www.ctdol.state.ct.us

U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division
 (Enforces federal child labor laws) 860/240-4160
www.dol.gov

Questions about workplace health & safety:

CT Dept. of Labor/OSHA Division 860/566-4550
 (Regulates state/municipal employers)
www.ctdol.state.ct.us/osha/osha.htm

Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA)
 (Regulates private employers)

Hartford Office (860) 240-3152
 Bridgeport Office (203) 579-5581
www.osha.gov

CT Department of Public Health,
 Environmental Epidemiology & Occupational Health Div.
 (Conducts surveillance of work-related illnesses and
 young worker injuries)
www.state.ct.us/dph 860/509-7744

Questions about workers' compensation:

CT Workers' Compensation Commission
www.wcc.state.ct.us 1-800-223-WORK

Summary of number of reported cases of selected respiratory diseases in CT by year*					
CT DPH Occupational Disease Surveillance Data					
	1998	1999	2000	2001	ODSS Total**
Asthma	19	24	28	15	239
RADS***	7	5	9	—	41
Silicosis	3	1	—	—	13
Asbestosis	7	6	7	—	117
Asbestos-related pleural diseases	10	9	6	2	126
TOTAL	46	45	50	17	536

* As of August 1, 2001. Data subject to change.
 ** Occupational Disease Surveillance System (ODSS) total since 1/1990
 *** Reactive Airways Dysfunction Syndrome