

Fair Wear Foundation guidelines on abrasive blasting

Exposure to dust is a serious health hazard for workers in the garment industry. This is especially true for those working with abrasive blasting of garments. Workers exposed to crystalline silica through abrasive blasting of garments like jeans are at great risk of contracting silicosis, a deadly lung disease. The connection between silicosis and sandblasting of jeans has been well documented through scientific studies in the garment industry.

There are already over 40 documented cases of workers in Turkey who have died from silicosis contracted by working with abrasive blasting of jeans. Exactly how many people who have died or are at risk is not clear since the industry is characterised by many subcontractors and often unregistered workers. Experts estimate that several thousand former garment workers are at risk of developing silicosis over the next years just in Turkey. As a result, Turkey banned manual abrasive blasting in April 2009.

The abrasive blasting method is currently used in jeans production in many countries. Little or no research has been done in most of these countries as to the working conditions in sandblasting workshops with regards to exposure to crystalline silica and the risk of silicosis. In most EU countries it is already forbidden to use abrasive material containing crystalline silica (the max limit is set to 1 % crystalline silica in most countries).

Given the challenges of controlling a supply chain in a way that guarantees that no unsafe abrasive blasting is done, and given the fatal risk associated with this technique, FWF requires affiliates to ban abrasive blasting throughout their supply chain. Several companies have already publicly stated that they have banned sandblasting from their supply chains, for example Hennes & Mauritz AB (H&M) and Levi Strauss & Co.

FWF requires that affiliated companies will take action to make sure that abrasive blasting is phased out of their supply chains. To facilitate this process, FWF asks all affiliates who produce denim products to strictly follow these steps:

1. Affiliates should investigate and map at what production sites abrasive blasting occurs in their supply chain.
2. Investigate at which of those production sites workers may have contracted silicosis or may have been put at risk. If workers in their supply chain have been affected by silicosis, the affiliate should make sure that adequate compensation is provided for the workers and their families, as well as necessary financial support for medical treatments.
3. If abrasive blasting is taking place, the affiliate should agree with FWF on a detailed and time-bound plan to phase out the use of abrasive blasting of garments. The phase out plan will depend on the monitoring system of the affiliate and health and safety procedure already in place. When new production methods are introduced, the affiliate should perform a risk assessment of these.

Under no circumstances can any blasting material used contain crystalline silica (i.e. the crystalline silica in the abrasive material should be less than 1 %). This should be stopped immediately (no phase out period allowed). Facilities used for any kind of abrasive blasting must be built in a way that minimises exposure to dust, blasting cabinets completely separating workers from dust must be used, regular health checks given as well as trainings for the workers on the risks involved.