

Media Release

Ingrid Stitt MP
Minister for Workplace Safety
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AUSTRALIAN-FIRST TO PROTECT WORKERS FROM DEADLY DISEASE

The Andrews Labor Government is launching Australia's first licensing scheme for businesses working with engineered stone to protect Victorian workers from exposure to dangerous silica dust.

Victorian employers working with engineered stone will be required to prove compliance with safety measures and obtain a licence, to reduce the risks of workers contracting silicosis.

The scheme will require employers to provide information to job applicants about the health risks associated with exposure to crystalline silica dust and ensure employees are given training to control risks.

It will also make eight silica-related offences eligible for infringements – creating an additional deterrent for employers not taking their safety obligations seriously.

The changes are part of new *Occupational Health and Safety Amendment (Crystalline Silica) Regulations 2021*, which also makes the state-wide ban on uncontrolled processing of engineered stone permanent.

People who work with engineered stone, commonly used for bench tops, are at risk of exposure to respirable crystalline silica dust, which can lead to deadly lung and respiratory diseases, including silicosis.

Tragically, since the start of 2021 four workers have died from silica related illness and WorkSafe has accepted 59 claims for silica related diseases.

Any employer or self-employed person who works with engineered stone must obtain a licence before November 2022. From then, manufacturers and suppliers can only supply engineered stone to licence holders. Failure to have the required licence may be used as evidence in criminal proceedings against that employer.

The new regulations will also introduce additional oversight of high-risk crystalline silica work across all industries, including construction and earth resources. These measures will come into effect in May 2022.

A rigorous auditing and compliance structure will support the new licensing scheme and builds on the Government's action plan to reduce silica-related disease, including a targeted enforcement blitz by WorkSafe inspectors and free silica health screenings for past and present stonemasons.

Since free health screenings were introduced in 2019, 1300 past and present stonemasons have registered for free silica health assessments through WorkSafe and the Alfred Occupational Respiratory Clinic. Sadly, about one in six workers who completed the screening have silicosis.

WorkSafe has made 491 silica related visits to workplaces since 1 January 2021 and issued 199 compliance notices ordering employers to improve their safe guards against exposure to silica dust.

Quotes attributable to Minister for Workplace Safety Ingrid Stitt

"Silicosis has already cost too many workers their health and, in some cases their lives – that's why we've banned dry cutting and are rolling out even greater protections for workers."

"Licensing the use of engineered stone will ensure people working with these products have the necessary safety protections, so that tradies aren't exposed to deadly silica dust."

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