



UH IBC APPENDIX K: Working Alone

(effective 2019)

Working alone, especially after hours, can be unsafe and should be avoided whenever possible. When it cannot be avoided, procedures to protect lab workers in the event of an emergency situation must be used. The Principal Investigator (PI) has the responsibility to ensure the safety of all lab workers in their laboratory, and after conducting a hazard review, can approve laboratory staff to work alone. Guidance is provided to develop a lab specific safety protocol for working alone. This policy applies to all work with biological materials or hazardous equipment in research laboratories.

The requirements are:

High School Students: Prohibited. Never permitted to work alone in laboratories, even with non-hazardous materials. They must always have a mentor/supervisor present. Review the Minors in Labs policy for additional information. No buddy system can be implemented.

Undergraduate Students: Never can work alone with biological materials, equipment, or operations that can result in injury or disease without prior written approval from the immediate PI or supervisor. Someone else with Biosafety Program required safety training must be in the lab or adjacent to the lab and be able to check on their safety. Strict buddy system can be used.

Graduate Students, Postdoctoral Fellows, Research Scientists, Technicians and Principal Investigators: These are considered full time laboratory workers, and laboratory training is integral to their professional training. They are permitted to work alone in a research laboratory after approval by the PI and following the lab's buddy system procedures.

Clinical Students, including Medical Students, Residents and Clinical Fellows: Since their laboratory training is only a portion of their professional training and work intermittently in a lab and have minimal laboratory experience, are not permitted to work alone in a lab with hazardous materials. They must use the "buddy system". Lab workers in this category, who have previous laboratory experience or where the non-clinical education is the primary laboratory training and experience, are permitted to work alone in a research laboratory after approval by the PI and following the lab's safety protocol for working alone.

Animal Work: Working alone with *in vivo* biological materials with animals is prohibited

Faculty, staff, students, and visitors who works with (or intends to work with) potentially biological materials that may result injury or infection, even Risk Group 1, must discuss this activity with their Principal Investigator (PI) or supervisor prior to conducting the work alone and determine that the risk of working alone is controllable under the specific conditions established by the PI or supervisor for the work. If the PI or supervisor determines that the risk cannot be minimized to a controllable

level, then the individual should perform the work only when others are present or a suitable alarm device is available that will summon help immediately. PI, Faculty and Supervisor are responsible for all activities; this cannot be relegated to staff (APT, RCUH, or students).

Laboratories should establish specific guidelines and standard operating procedures specifying when working alone is not allowed and develop notification procedures when working alone occurs, recommend the buddy system.

BUDDY SYSTEM: If a laboratory worker determines it is necessary to work alone, consideration should be given to notifying someone else in the area – in an adjacent room, another lab on the same floor, or a lab on a different floor. It is recommended that a “buddy system” be established for regular, routine checks on personnel working alone, such as every 15-30 minutes, to ensure that no accidents have occurred. This could be accomplished by physically walking to the room where the lab worker is or through the use of a phone. A system of visual checks should be established to indicate there are no problems or to determine if help is needed. The buddy must be knowledgeable of the procedure that is being done and aware of the emergency procedures and location of emergency equipment.

Please note: For rooms that are locked due to security needs, prior arrangements need to be made to allow the designated buddy access. Be aware that Emergency Responders may not always have access to locked doors – which could result in a delay in response in the event of an emergency. Also understand that if the door to the lab does not have a window, or if the window is covered, then there is a chance that if something happened to a person working alone in a locked lab, then they may not be discovered until someone else from the lab goes into the room (which could be an hour or more).

Working alone in the laboratory.

No inherent biologic danger exists to a person working alone in the laboratory; however, the supervisor is responsible for knowing if and when a person is assigned to work alone. Because assigning a person to work alone is a facility-specific decision, a risk assessment should be conducted that accounts for all safety considerations, including type of work, physical safety, laboratory security, emergency response, potential exposure or injury, and other laboratory-specific

Reference

CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Guidelines for Safe Work Practices in Human and Animal Medical Diagnostic Laboratories. 6 January 2012 61(01); 1-101.