

Protect A Generation Of Workers – Ban Engineered Stone

Briefing for Members of Parliament



The Issue

Engineered stone, widely used for kitchen worktops, bathroom surfaces and other interior fittings, can contain more than 90 per cent crystalline silica. During fabrication and installation, cutting, drilling, grinding and polishing release respirable crystalline silica dust that penetrates deep into the lungs.

Exposure to this dust is causing workers to develop silicosis — an irreversible and potentially fatal occupational lung disease. Evidence from the UK and overseas indicates that silicosis associated with engineered stone often develops more rapidly and aggressively than traditional forms of the disease, with workers becoming seriously ill after relatively short periods of exposure.

Workers in their 30s and 40s are now developing life-changing lung disease simply from doing their jobs.

This is entirely preventable.

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Unite's Call

Unite is calling on the UK Government to introduce an immediate prohibition on the import, manufacture, supply and fabrication of engineered stone.

Australia has already implemented a nationwide ban following a sharp rise in cases of accelerated silicosis, while other jurisdictions, including California, are introducing significant restrictions.

The UK should act now before more workers suffer avoidable illness.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimates that more than 1,000 UK businesses work with engineered stone. Without decisive action, thousands of workers remain at risk.

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Evidence from Unite

Unite maintains a national silica dust exposure register, which includes workers employed in the engineered stone industry.

The union is currently supporting members pursuing industrial injuries benefits and legal claims arising from occupational exposure to respirable crystalline silica, including exposure from engineered stone.

The register has identified ten major employers where Unite members have recorded silica dust exposure, representing more than 1,100 workers.

Analysis of Unite membership across sectors where silica dust is generated suggests that several thousand Unite members may be exposed to respirable crystalline silica during their work. In addition, hundreds of Unite members have identified through the union's petition that they work directly with engineered stone products.

These figures demonstrate that the scale of potential exposure is substantial.

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What is Engineered Stone?

Engineered stone is a manufactured composite material commonly used for kitchen worktops, bathroom surfaces, fireplace surrounds and similar products.

It is produced by combining crushed stone—usually quartz—with polymer resins and pigments before being compressed and cured into slabs.

The product is durable, relatively inexpensive and can be manufactured to resemble natural stones such as marble and granite.

Unlike most natural stone, however, engineered stone frequently contains more than 90 per cent crystalline silica.

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Why is it Dangerous?

Natural stones such as granite and marble typically contain significantly lower concentrations of crystalline silica than engineered stone.

During fabrication and installation, engineered stone generates extremely high concentrations of respirable crystalline silica dust unless stringent controls are in place.

Once inhaled, these microscopic particles remain in the lungs, causing permanent scarring and inflammation.

Exposure can result in:

- Silicosis
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and other chronic respiratory illnesses
- Lung cancer
- Premature death

Evidence indicates that disease associated with engineered stone may develop after relatively short periods of exposure and can progress rapidly, even after exposure has ceased.

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Recent Developments

Concern about engineered stone has increased significantly following a growing number of cases involving young kitchen worktop fabricators developing advanced silicosis.

In England, a London Coroner issued a Prevention of Future Deaths Report highlighting the risks associated with engineered stone and calling for stronger action to prevent further fatalities.

International regulators have also concluded that strengthened workplace controls alone have not prevented workers from developing disease.

Following extensive independent review, Australia introduced a nationwide prohibition on engineered stone in July 2024 after cases continued to rise despite tighter regulations introduced several years earlier.

Immediate Action Required

While Unite continues to campaign for a complete ban, immediate action is required to protect workers currently exposed.

Unite calls upon the HSE to:

- Increase inspections of engineered stone manufacturers and installers.
 - Rigorously enforce existing control measures.
 - Use the full range of enforcement powers where employers fail to protect workers.
 - Strengthen requirements for exposure monitoring and health surveillance.
 - Ensure any substitute products introduced to replace engineered stone do not create equivalent occupational health risks.
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Training and Guidance

Following engagement with Unite and other stakeholders, the HSE has published guidance on working safely with engineered stone.

The British Occupational Hygiene Society (BOHS), with technical input from HSE specialists, has also developed free online training covering the risks associated with respirable crystalline silica and methods of controlling exposure.

While improved guidance and training are welcome, they cannot eliminate the inherent risk presented by a material containing exceptionally high concentrations of crystalline silica.

The most effective control remains removing the hazard altogether.

Conclusion

The evidence is compelling.

Engineered stone presents an unacceptable occupational health risk.

Workers should not develop an incurable and potentially fatal disease simply because they manufacture or install kitchen worktops.

Australia has demonstrated that a ban is both practical and necessary. The United Kingdom should now follow that example by prohibiting the import, manufacture, supply and fabrication of engineered stone unless and until its safe use can be demonstrated.

Every delay places more workers at risk of developing preventable, life-limiting disease.

Unite therefore asks Members of Parliament from all parties to support a ban on engineered stone and work with the Government to ensure that no future generation of workers pays for this product with their health.





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