



Maritime &
Coastguard
Agency

Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers

2024 Edition





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About this Code

General

1. This Code is published by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) and endorsed by the National Maritime Occupational Health and Safety Committee, UK Chamber of Shipping, Nautilus International and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) as best practice guidance for improving health and safety on board ship.
2. It is intended primarily for merchant seafarers on UK-registered ships. The Code is addressed to everyone on a ship regardless of rank or rating, and to those ashore responsible for safety, because the recommendations can be effective only if they are understood by all, and if everyone cooperates in their implementation. Those not actually engaged in a job in hand should be aware of what is being done, so that they may avoid putting themselves at risk or causing risk to others by impeding or needlessly interfering with the conduct of their work.
3. The Code covers the regulatory framework and provides best practice guidance for health and safety on board ship. It also gives guidance on safety management, identifies statutory duties underlying the advice and includes practical information for safe working on board.
4. From 2024 onwards, this document reflects a large-scale review of the Code, which aimed to improve the functionality of the Code as a reference document for seafarers. As a result of this review, the MCA has redesigned and modernised the Code to improve its structure, ensure consistency and simplify its language. The use of recurring design features will enable quicker reference and generally aid understanding, making it clearer and easier to follow. You may wish to refer to 'How to use this document', which outlines key features to help you make the most of this document. In addition, there is a change to the physical format of the document from loose-leaf to bound, to improve the end-user experience, remove the yearly manual updating process and seek a more cost-effective and sustainable solution.
5. This updated Code was developed with support from industry (see acknowledgements, Appendix 4), including an online survey, several focus groups, a stakeholder engagement exercise and a public consultation which was held from August to November 2023. As part of this review, individuals working in the maritime industry, MCA survey and inspection teams and MCA policy teams contributed to the new content, structure and design features for each chapter of the Code.

Living on board: occupational health and safety risks

6. Occupational health and safety risks may lead to death, permanent disability, temporary disability or reduced work capability. Occupational health and safety risks may arise from work-related hazards or from the general living and working conditions on board, sometimes referred to as ambient factors. In cases where some risks are unavoidable, appropriate control measures should be implemented to minimise exposure to hazards that may cause injury, disease or death. Harmful exposure may have short-term or long-term adverse health effects.
7. Risks inherent in the working environment must be identified and evaluated ('risk assessment'), and measures must be taken to remove or minimise those risks, to protect seafarers and others from harm, so far as is reasonably practicable.

8. These risks include, but are not limited to:
 - ambient factors, such as noise, vibration, lighting, ultra-violet light, non-ionising radiation and extreme temperatures
 - inherent hazards, such as the vessel's structure, means of access, ergonomic hazards and hazardous materials such as asbestos
 - hazards arising from work activities, such as work in enclosed spaces, use of equipment and machinery, working on and below deck in adverse weather, dangerous cargo and ballast operations, and exposure to biological hazards or chemicals
 - health risks, such as fatigue and impacts on mental occupational health
 - the emergency and accident response.
9. In addition, there are risks from violence in the workplace, tobacco smoking, drug abuse, alcohol misuse and drug or alcohol dependence.
10. Each of these risks is covered in this Code.

The status of the Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers

11. In the UK, the Merchant Shipping Act 1995 allows the Secretary of State to make regulations to secure the safety of ships and those on them. Much of the Code relates to matters that are the subject of such regulations. In such cases, the Code is intended to give guidance as to how the statutory obligations should be fulfilled.
12. Many regulations lay down specific requirements for standards of safety, equipment or operations, which must be satisfied to comply with the law. Where there are no specific requirements, the MCA generally considers compliance with the Code as demonstrating that the company, employer or seafarer did what was reasonable to comply with the regulations. Each situation will be considered and evaluated on an individual basis. The guidance must never be regarded as superseding or amending regulation, and risk assessment should always be used to ensure that all risks are addressed.
13. References to British Standards (BS) or European Norms (EN) contained in this Code are made with the understanding that 'an alternative Standard which provides, in use, equivalent levels of safety, suitability and fitness for purpose' is equally acceptable.
14. The Code provides guidance on safe working practices for many situations that commonly arise on ships, and the basic principles can be applied to many other work situations that are not specifically covered. However, it should not be considered a comprehensive guide to safety: the advice it contains should always be considered in conjunction with the findings of the company's or employer's risk assessment, and any information, procedures or working instructions provided by the manufacturer, supplier or any other source should be followed.
15. It is a statutory requirement that seafarers are provided with the information necessary to ensure their health and safety. The MCA considers that on UK-registered ships this means that all those with specific responsibilities for safety should have immediate access to this Code, and that it should be readily available to all seafarers on board; for example, a copy should be kept in the mess room. It should be provided in appropriate formats (e.g. electronic and hard copy) in sufficient quantity to ensure easy access. The Code should be supplemented by safety manuals, work instructions and other guidance issued by shipping companies for their particular ships, as appropriate.
16. Non-UK-registered ships are not subject to all UK health and safety regulations, although failure to meet international standards of safety enshrined in those regulations may result in enforcement action while the ship is in UK waters.

International Management Code for the Safe Operation of Ships and for Pollution Prevention (International Safety Management (ISM) Code)

17. All ships of 500 gross tonnage (GT) and over are required to operate a safety management system in compliance with the ISM Code. The ISM Code provides for safety management on board the ships to which it applies. The safety management system may not in itself cover all aspects of seafarer safety and health as required by the Maritime Labour Convention 2006 (MLC 2006); for example, with respect to disease prevention. However, a shipowner may develop that system to do so. Duplication should be avoided.
18. Compliance with the ISM Code complements existing health and safety regulations and use of the guidance in this Code. For example:
 - The ISM Code requires that the Company's safety management system should 'ensure that applicable codes, guidelines and standards recommended by the ... Administration' are taken into account. This Code is one such 'applicable code', and an ISM audit may consider how the guidance it contains has been implemented.
 - The ISM Code requires that the 'safety management objectives of the Company should, inter alia, ... establish safeguards against all identified risks ...'. This Code will assist the company in identifying risks and establishing safe practices to safeguard against them.
 - The ISM Code requires the company to 'define and document the responsibility, authority and interrelation of all personnel who manage, perform and verify work relating to and affecting safety and pollution prevention'. This Code gives advice on the roles of those with particular safety responsibilities, and highlights work areas where specific responsibilities should be allocated to a **competent person**. 

Merchant Shipping and Fishing Vessels (Health and Safety at Work) Regulations

Duties of shipowners

19. It is the duty of shipowners and employers to protect the health and safety of seafarers and others so far as is reasonably practicable. The principles that should underpin health and safety measures are:

 *S.I. 1997/2962, Reg. 5*

- the avoidance of risks, which among other things includes the combating of risks at source and the replacement of dangerous practices, substances or equipment by non-dangerous or less dangerous practices, substances or equipment
- the evaluation of unavoidable risks and the taking of action to reduce them
- the adoption of work patterns and procedures that take account of the capacity of the individual, especially in respect of the design of the workplace and the choice of work equipment, with a view in particular to alleviating monotonous work and to reducing any consequent adverse effect on workers' health and safety
- the adaptation of procedures to take account of new technology and other changes in working practices, equipment, the working environment and any other factors that may affect health and safety
- the adoption of a coherent approach to management of the vessel or undertaking, taking account of health and safety at every level of the organisation
- giving collective protective measures priority over individual protective measures
- the provision of appropriate and relevant information and instruction for workers.

20. The company and other employers owe a duty of care to other workers on board who may be affected. Where passengers are also covered, this will normally be stated.

 [MGN 492 \(M+F\) Amendment 1](#)

21. The company is also responsible for ensuring that seafarers have the appropriate information, training and instruction to enable them to work safely, making arrangements for consultation with seafarers about health and safety matters, and having systems for recording and investigating safety incidents and accidents on board. Further information about each of these aspects is contained in the following chapters.

22. The master is the representative of the company.

Duties of seafarers

23. Seafarers are required to:

- take reasonable care for their own health and safety and that of others on board who may be affected by their acts or omissions
- cooperate with anyone else carrying out health and safety duties, including compliance with control measures identified during the employer's or company's risk assessment
- report any identified serious hazards or deficiencies immediately to the appropriate officer or other responsible person
- make proper use of plant and machinery, and treat any hazard to health or safety (such as a dangerous substance) with due caution.

24. Under the regulations, it is also an offence for any person intentionally or recklessly to interfere with or misuse anything provided in the interests of health and safety.

Terms used in this Code

25. In this Code, unless otherwise defined in the specific chapter:

'Company' is used in the sense that it is used in the ISM Code, as the person responsible for the operation of the ship. (This is often the same organisation as the 'shipowner' referred to in health and safety regulations.)

'Competent person' means someone who has sufficient training and experience or knowledge and other qualities that allow them to carry out the work in hand effectively and safely. The level of competence required will depend on the complexity of the situation and the particular work involved.

'Responsible person' means the person designated to take responsibility for a particular work activity. There may be particular competency requirements attached to that work activity.

'Seafarer' means anyone whose normal place of work is on board the ship, whether or not they are employed.

'Thorough examination' means a systematic and detailed examination of the equipment and safety-critical parts, carried out at specified intervals by a competent person, who must then complete a written report.

‘Inspection’: the purpose of an inspection is to identify whether work equipment can be operated, adjusted and maintained safely, with any deterioration detected and remedied before it results in a health and safety risk. The need for inspection and inspection frequencies should be determined through risk assessment. In many cases, a quick visual check before use will be sufficient. However, inspection is necessary for any equipment where significant risks to health and safety may arise from incorrect installation, reinstallation, deterioration or any other circumstances.

‘Safety management system’ means the safety management system for the time being in place on the ship.

Regulations, standards, documents and other sources of information referred to in the Code

26. Where chapters of the Code refer to other documents, these are referenced in the margin, and further details, including how to obtain them, are contained in the appendices:

Appendix 1 Regulations, marine notices and guidance issued by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Appendix 2 Other sources of information

Appendix 3 Standards and specifications referred to in this Code

Appendix 4 Acknowledgements.

Keeping the Code up to date

27. The MCA intends to issue regular updates to the Code to ensure that it remains relevant and reflects changes in standards and in working practices. Updates will be considered by the industry working group and will be subject to wider consultation before final agreement. If you notice anything that requires updating, please notify the MCA at seafarersafety@mcga.gov.uk

28. The Code will be produced in digital form in due course.

How to use this document

This is a brief guide to the new features and what they mean.

Boxes and sidebars

Each chapter begins with a summary of the key points.

This is followed by a list of the organisation’s responsibilities in a given subject.

The yellow sidebars with the flowchart symbol identify key steps in procedures.

Red boxes highlight critical safety information.

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5 Fire precautions

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Prevention of fire on board ship is essential. Sections 5.2 to 5.6 outline some important organisational measures to reduce the risk of fire. Advice to seafarers is included in Chapter 4.

Key point

- Good housekeeping and safe disposal of oil-contaminated materials can prevent fires from developing.

Your organisation should

- make all personnel fully aware of the precautions necessary to prevent fires.
- ensure that designated smoking areas are clearly marked, referenced within vessel procedures/standing orders and identified during shipboard familiarisation tours.
- ensure a competent person inspects all electrical equipment in use on board regularly and confirms it is safe for use.

5.2 Electrical and other fittings

5.2.1 Secure all electrical appliances and provide permanent connections whenever possible. Keep all electric wiring well maintained, clean and dry. Never exceed the rated load capacity of the wires and fuses.

5.2.2 Flexible leads should be as short as practicable and arranged to prevent their being chafed or cut in service.

5.2.3 Do not use makeshift plugs, sockets or fuses.

5.2.4 Do not overload circuits because this causes the wires to overheat, destroying insulation and resulting in a possible short-circuit, which could start a fire. Show notices warning that workers should get approval from a responsible officer before connecting any personal electrical appliances, such as mobile phones, to the ship's supply.

10.1.4 Warning

Accidents, poor organisation or an unsatisfactory working method can cause musculoskeletal injuries.

SI 1998/2857, Reg 5, MGN 90 (M+F) Amendment 1

This box highlights important points to remember.

These sidebars show information that may help you create a checklist.

These boxes shows key tips for safe working. Do not read these in isolation as you could miss important information from the main body of the text.

158 Noise, vibration and other physical agents Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers



Whatever form of protection is chosen, it must:

- reduce employees' noise exposure to below 85 dB(A)
- be suitable for the employees' working environment – consider comfort and hygiene
- be compatible with other protective equipment used by the employee (eg safety helmet, dust mask and eye protection).

HSE advises adding a 4dB(A) real-world correction factor to hearing protection calculations.

Wherever possible, seafarers should be provided with a suitable range of effective hearing protection so they can choose the one that suits them best. Some seafarers may prefer a particular type, or may not be able to use some types of hearing protection because of the risk of ear infections.

Particular consideration should be given to those seafarers who wear spectacles or eye protection similar to spectacles, which have arms that go over the ear. In such cases, ear defenders may not fit securely against the ear because of the presence of the spectacle arms and thus provide inadequate protection against noise. In such circumstances, another form of ear protection may be more suitable.



Companies should ensure that hearing protection works effectively and check that:

- its overall condition is still good and it is clean
- ear defender seals are undamaged
- the tension of the headbands is not reduced
- there are no unofficial modifications
- compressible earplugs are soft, pliable and clean.

5. Companies should ensure that seafarers use hearing protection when required to.



In this context companies may want to

- include the need to wear hearing protection in their safety policy, and put someone in authority in overall charge of issuing it and making sure that replacement hearing protection is readily available
- carry out spot checks to see that the rules are being followed and that hearing protection is being used properly
- consider whether failure to use hearing protectors when required to do so should be included in the company's disciplinary procedures
- ensure that all managers and supervisors set a good example and wear hearing protection at all times when in ear-protection zones.

Symbols in the text

The book symbol means further reading. This could be the legislation on which the guidance is based, or another publication on the same subject.

The magnifying glass symbol means the word or phrase is explained in the glossary.

Recommended maximum limits for different areas on board ship

The limits shown in Table 12.6 should be regarded as maximum levels rather than desirable levels and, as appropriate, take account of the attenuation (noise reduction) that can be achieved with ear protectors.

 [MGN 658 \(M+F\) Annex 1; IMO Resolution MSC.337\(91\)](#)

Before closing to earth, make the trip features inoperative unless this is impracticable. After closing lock the circuit breaker in the earth position and make the trip features inoperative, posting a caution notice nearby.

 **Additional earths** may be applied at the point of work after a permit to work has been issued by the competent person in charge of the work.

Circuit main earths/additional earths may also be removed/replaced at the point of work after the issue of a sanction for test by the authorised person conducting the test.

Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers

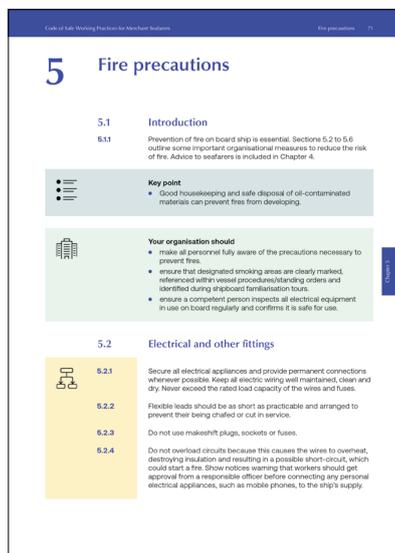
2024 Edition

The Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seafarers is a comprehensive set of guidelines and safe working practices designed to ensure the safety and health of seafarers working on board merchant ships.

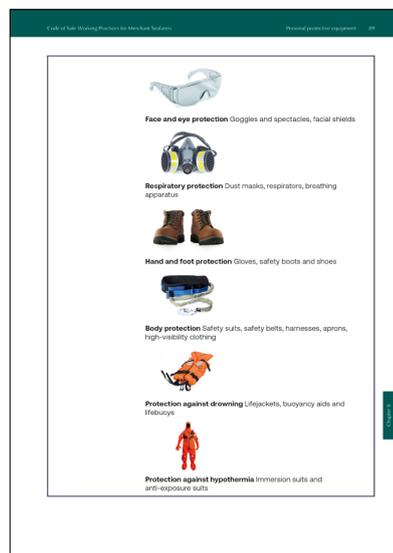
It is a statutory requirement for the current edition of the Code to be carried on board all UK ships (except fishing vessels and pleasure craft). The Code contains essential health and safety information, and it must be made available to any seafarer on board who requests it.

What's new

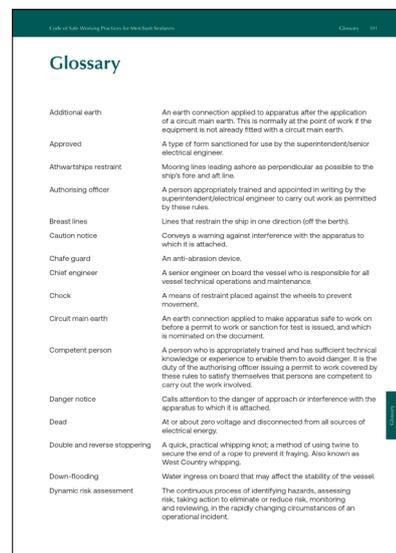
The Code has undergone a comprehensive redesign and modernisation process to improve its structure, ensure consistency, and simplify its language. Its recurring design features enable quicker reference and improve clarity and ease of understanding.



Recurring design features



Simple diagrams



Glossary

