Preventing minor cuts and lacerations

Key points

- In the landscaping and horticultural services industry, cuts, lacerations, and punctures are the second most common type of injury reported annually, according to the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA’s) Office of Statistical Analysis. They account for 17 percent of reported injuries each year.
- Severe cuts and lacerations can result in amputations of fingers, toes, hands, and feet. Such acute injuries also might lead to permanent disability — or even death.
- Cuts and lacerations occur most often when landscaping workers are using mowers, power tools, and wood chippers. Typical accidents include getting a foot caught in the mower blades, being pulled into a wood chipper, and cutting one’s legs while using a chain saw or power trimmer.

Employers and supervisors checklist

- Allow workers to alternate chores that require gripping tools with those that don’t and heavy-duty tasks with less strenuous ones. This will reduce the chances of fatigue-related injuries (an employee cutting his thigh when he lowers his arms to rest them while holding a hedge trimmer, for example).
- Ensure workers wear appropriate clothing, and provide them with necessary personal protective equipment and training in the correct use of all such equipment. This could prevent accidents like the one reported by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health in which a worker, wearing gloves with a flared, gauntlet style cuff, was pulled into a brush chipper. Clothing and gear that can protect against cuts and lacerations include long sleeves, gloves, thick pants or jeans, chain saw chaps, and face shields. Make sure workers don’t wear loose-fitting clothing or jewelry.
- Develop, implement, and enforce a safety and health program to instruct employees in hazard recognition and to provide clear guidance on safe work procedures and safe work practices.
- When an employee is feeding a brush/wood chipper, designate another employee to serve as a safety watch.
- Remember, you are responsible for the safe condition of the tools and equipment your employees use. Ensure tools are kept sharp and clean and that the instructions in the owner’s manual for lubricating and changing accessories are followed.
- Train employees in the proper use and handling of tools and equipment.
- Remove all damaged tools from use and tag them “Do Not Use.”
- Make sure exposed moving parts of power tools are safeguarded and employees know not to remove these guards. According to OSHA, belts, gears, shafts, pulleys, sprockets, spindles, drums, flywheels, chains, and other reciprocating, rotating, or moving parts of equipment must be guarded.
Employee dos and don’ts

Do:

- Wear appropriate clothing and protective gear including pants, long sleeves, steel-toed boots, goggles or a face shield, and gloves. If you’re using a chain saw, hedge trimmer, or other tool whose blade will be near your legs, wear chain-saw chaps as well.
- Make sure others stay at least 50 feet from you while you’re mowing or using a line trimmer. No matter the task, keep people not involved with the work at a safe distance.
- Before cutting grass, inspect the area for rocks, sticks, and debris that could become projectiles.
- Be aware of the rotational direction of the cutting head when operating a line trimmer, and position yourself and the trimmer so debris will be projected away from people.
- Stay a safe distance away from rotating brush-cutting blades, tiller blades, trencher blades, saws, and moving or sharp parts of other equipment.
- Use a long limb, branch, or push stick to feed small trimmings into the brush chippers.
- Stand to the side of the feed table when feeding trimmings into chippers.
- Be aware many hedge trimmers, chain saws, and line trimmers continue to run for five to 10 seconds after you switch them off. If you immediately lower your arms, bringing the blade in contact with your skin, you could be cut.
- Pay attention to your work and to the position of the tool in relation to your body when operating a power tool.
- Keep good footing and maintain balance when operating power tools. Sturdy work boots can help with this since they provide a wide base of support.
- Disconnect tools when not using them, before servicing and cleaning them, and when changing accessories such as blades, bits, and cutters.
- Secure work with clamps or a vise when possible, freeing both hands to operate a tool.
- Inspect equipment before each use. Be sure that all safety guards and other safety devices are in place and undamaged.
- If you or a co-worker sustains a cut or laceration, find the cleanest cloth available and use it to put pressure on the wound. Let your employer know what’s happened, and go immediately to an emergency room.

Don’t:

- Operate tools or equipment until you have been properly trained.
- Attempt to unclog a mower deck with your hands or feet. Turn the lawn mower off and use an instrument to clear the material.
- Remove, disable, or bypass a cutter guard or other safety device. Immediately report any missing or broken safety devices to your supervisor.
- Direct saw blades, knives, or other tools toward people or high-traffic areas of the job site.
- Use tools that have not been properly maintained or sharpened. Dull tools can cause more hazards than sharp ones.
- Carry a tool by the cord or hose.
- Hold fingers on the switch button while carrying a tool.
- Wear loose-fitting clothing or jewelry since it can become caught in moving equipment parts. Tie back long hair and remove dangling jacket strings and anything else that could become entangled.
- Leave powered equipment unattended.
- Ignore your doctor’s advice if you sustain a cut or laceration. Deep lacerations can require occupational therapy to ensure your range of movement isn’t inhibited. Change the dressing on your wound, go to therapy sessions, do recommended home exercises, and don’t return to work until your doctor says doing so is okay.