



WFF Silica Dust FAQs:

Silica Dust from engineered stone worktops is in the news lately, with talk of product bans in Australia. What do I and my customers need to know?

What's the danger to my customers and my staff?

NONE: There is no health risk in handling, shipping, installing or using engineered stone worktops. Fine particles of respirable silica dust are created only during the cutting and polishing processes at the manufacturing stage. They are therefore purely to do with factory management in the fabrication process.

Is the HSE aware?

VERY AWARE: Respirable dust in general has always been a high priority for factory inspections, and the HSE understands the additional risks to health associated with breathing microscopic particles of carcinogenic silica dust. Current HSE guidance for factory owners and enforcement teams reads:

“Products containing silica can be processed safely when proper controls are put in place. We would urge all manufacturers and fitters to ensure that they use suitable controls to protect their workers and themselves from inhaling silica dust.”

So who is at risk?

NON-PROFESSIONALS: Professional worktop fabricators cut stone in factory environments, on specialist machinery, with water-suppression to capture dust at the cutting blade. The biggest risk to workers' (and customers') safety in the UK comes from the dust created by builders or joiners buying stone blanks from distributors and dry-cutting in customers' gardens with an angle-grinder or modified joinery tools.

Why not just ban quartz?

NO NEED: THE CUSTOMER DECIDES. Fabricators only cut the materials their customers ask for. If everyone stopped buying quartz tomorrow, the market for quartz worktops would vanish overnight. But that doesn't mean workers would no longer be at risk: silica is also present in granite, natural quartzite and other stone and ceramic worktop materials (although typically at significantly lower concentrations).

Machine cutting quartz releases a higher concentration of Respirable Crystalline Silica than other "stone" materials and requires effective dust control to keep levels below the regulatory maximum. Banning quartz would reduce the problem but not eliminate it. With effective controls, quartz can be processed safely.

What is the WFF doing about this?

CHAMPIONING BEST PRACTICE: The WFF was originally established to share best-practice, keep our workers as safe as possible and keep our processes as clean as possible. WFF is recognised as the voice of professional fabricators alongside trade unions and other stone and glass industry bodies in the HSE's 'Charge' advisory group.

The WFF supports the move to natural stone and other engineered worktop products with less silica content as this will reduce the risks to workers. Processing of all stone worktops should only be carried out by professionals who are properly trained, using appropriate equipment to manage the risks.

What can I do to reassure my customers?

BUY FROM REPUTABLE FABRICATORS: WFF Members all operate automated cutting tools using state of the art dust suppression, undertake regular health audits of their workers and hold detailed data sheets to prove the provenance of the materials they supply. A professional supplier will be happy to help you with any detailed questions about individual materials, and help you choose alternatives to satisfy a particular specification or performance requirement.