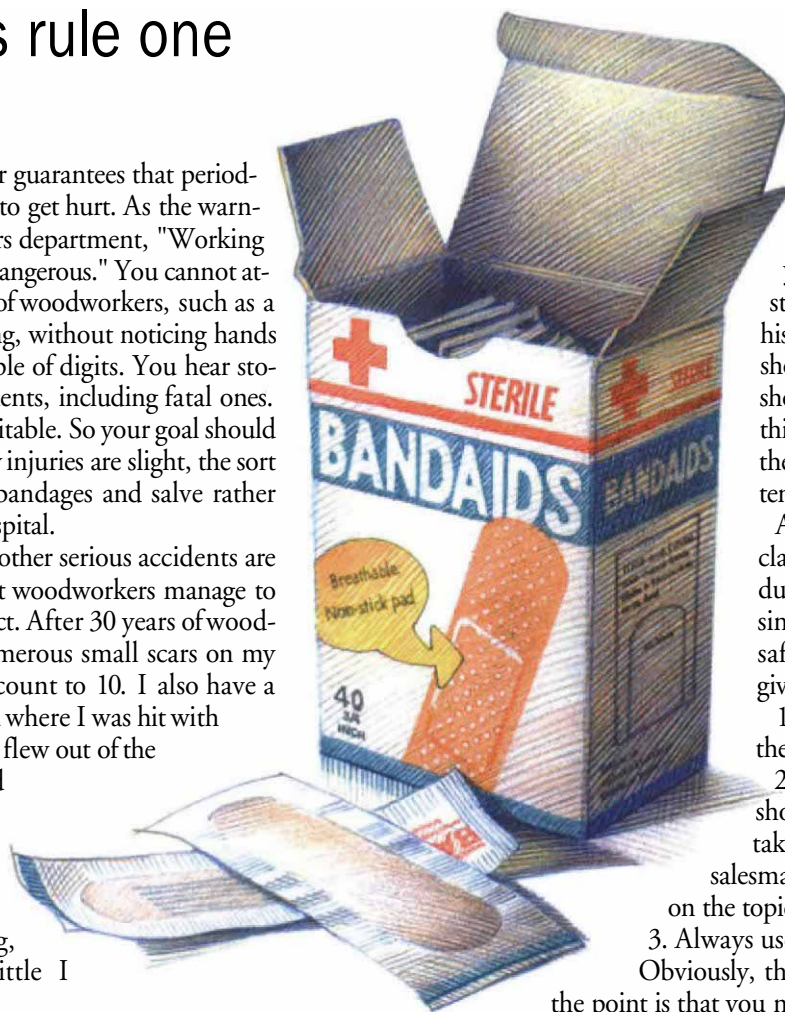


Safety is rule one

Being a woodworker guarantees that periodically you are going to get hurt. As the warning says in the Letters department, "Working wood is inherently dangerous." You cannot attend any gathering of woodworkers, such as a show or club meeting, without noticing hands that are short a couple of digits. You hear stories of horrible accidents, including fatal ones.

Accidents are inevitable. So your goal should be to ensure that any injuries are slight, the sort you can treat with bandages and salve rather than a trip to the hospital.

Amputations and other serious accidents are not inevitable. Most woodworkers manage to keep their body intact. After 30 years of woodworking, I have numerous small scars on my hands but can still count to 10. I also have a scar on my forehead where I was hit with a piece of wood that flew out of the lathe. I wish I had started using hearing protection a lot sooner. My doctor tells me I cannot regain my hearing, only protect the little I



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have left. Otherwise, I am as complete as when I entered the world. After 21 years of teaching some 3,500 people, only two have cut themselves badly enough to require a doctor's attention. I like to think it is because of the safety lecture I give at the beginning of every class and the reinforcement we give before every demonstration.

Although there are lots of safety rules, safety is a state of mind. In other words, your best protection is learning to behave safely. Developing this state of mind requires embedding it in your brain so that a little voice screams every time you flirt with danger. You should create this state of mind while still a beginner, but it never hurts seasoned woodworkers to refresh and strengthen it.

The best reminders are simple and childlike, like the jingles Madison Avenue uses to embed product names in your mind. Our staff member Dan Faia still remembers the annoying little adage his high-school shop teacher used: "A clean shop is a happy shop. A happy shop is a fun shop. A fun shop is a safe shop." Although this corny ditty generated a lot of scorn from the teenage students, Dan has never forgotten it, and he is still influenced by it.

A local kindergarten teacher brings her class to our school every year for an introduction to woodworking, and we set up simple projects for the students to do. My safety instructions for them are the same I give to adults:

1. Tools are not toys. In other words, use them only for their intended purpose.
2. Never use a tool until you have been shown how to handle it properly. For adults, take time to learn to use a tool. Have the salesman give you some instruction, read a book on the topic or take a class.
3. Always use a tool the way you were shown.

Obviously, there are other important safety rules, but the point is that you never outgrow the basic truths, and you're never too smart to slip up.

Rules to live by

While each tool has its safety rules, here are some general practices that you should repeat until they become ingrained habits.

Don't hurry or work tired—Most accidents happen because the woodworker did not want to take the time to prepare for just one quick cut. The person knows the risk but figures it won't happen this one time. When you are fatigued or otherwise impaired, get out of the shop.

If it makes you nervous, don't do it—After all the effort you go through to train that little voice in your head, listen to it. Trust it to warn you when something is unsafe.

Heed the manufacturer's warnings—We all know those safety instructions are there primarily to protect the manufacturer from liability. However, liability means someone has gotten hurt, so they are there to protect you as well. This also applies to guards. Sure, some of them are a pain, but so is an injury.

Wear eye protection—Put on safety glasses whenever you are doing anything that can send even the smallest piece of wood or

Rules of Thumb (continued)

metal into the air. Don them whenever starting a machine or swinging a hammer or mallet. My worst eye injury was temporary, but it sure hurt. It happened five years ago when I was trimming the end of a tenon with a gouge and mallet, and a chunk of wood popped upward. For 25 years, I had gotten away with doing this task without eye protection. With a hand over my throbbing eye, I swore if I was still able to see when I took the hand away that I would wear goggles ever after.

Protect your hearing and lungs—The injuries we risk are not always as immediate as being hit in the eye or trimming a digit off a hand. You lose your hearing so slowly you don't notice, but eventually you end up as I have, cupping your hand behind your ear to hear even a normal conversation.

Wood dust and other products we use can do cumulative damage to our lungs. Install dust collectors and air cleaners, and wear a quality dust mask when doing anything that creates a lot of fine dust. Remember, the dust is there, even though you cannot see it most of the time. In the winter, when the sun is low and shines directly through your shop windows, notice the ever-present cloud of dust hanging in the air. The memory of this cloud should set off a little voice in your head that prompts you to turn on the air cleaner and put on a dust mask whenever you pick up sandpaper.

Keep the shop clean and uncluttered—I have heard of lots of accidents that involve tripping over clutter or tools falling into ma-

chines. These incidents are a lot less likely if you clean regularly. At our school, each student is instructed to immediately pick up any small pieces of wood that fall to the floor and place them in the burn barrel. Because the staff walks around constantly, we have a vested interest in this. I have nearly fallen several times stepping on small cutoffs.

We have students put away their tools and clean the benches after every operation. We stop the class and clean the shop several times a day and before leaving for the night. Clean and uncluttered also applies to your person. Remove jewelry, roll up sleeves, and tie up long hair.

Prevent accidents, but prepare for them—This sounds a bit contradictory, sort of like the old Roman saying, "To preserve peace, prepare for war." But a quick response can head off a true disaster. Keep emergency numbers by the phone. Keep a medical kit in the shop. Display and maintain your fire extinguishers. Install a master kill switch for all of your machines. Keep hearing, eye and dust protection at every workstation.

Protect your property—Finally, safety applies to your property as well as to your person. I know numerous people whose shops have burned to the ground. Dispose of oil-soaked rags properly. Keep flammables tightly capped and in a metal cabinet. Unplug battery chargers and portable power tools before leaving the shop for the night. □