



European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

# Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions, Spain

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*The results of the Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions reveal an improvement in the risk preventive systems used by Spanish businesses. However, working conditions seem to have slightly disimproved, according to workers' self-assessment of their own conditions. This trend has had negative health outcomes.*

## **Introduction**

The Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions (V Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Trabajo) was published in October 2004 by INSHT , the [Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene in the Workplace](#) (Instituto Nacional de Seguridad e Higiene en el Trabajo), a subsidiary body of the [Spanish Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs](#) . The main goal of the study was to assess working conditions and provide an overview of health and safety conditions in Spanish workplaces under the following specific objectives:

- to find out those issues in the workplace that have an influence on workers' health and the extent to which workers are exposed to them;
- to identify existing preventive structures and assess company preventive activities based on practical measures undertaken;
- to establish trends in working conditions in the Spanish labour market.

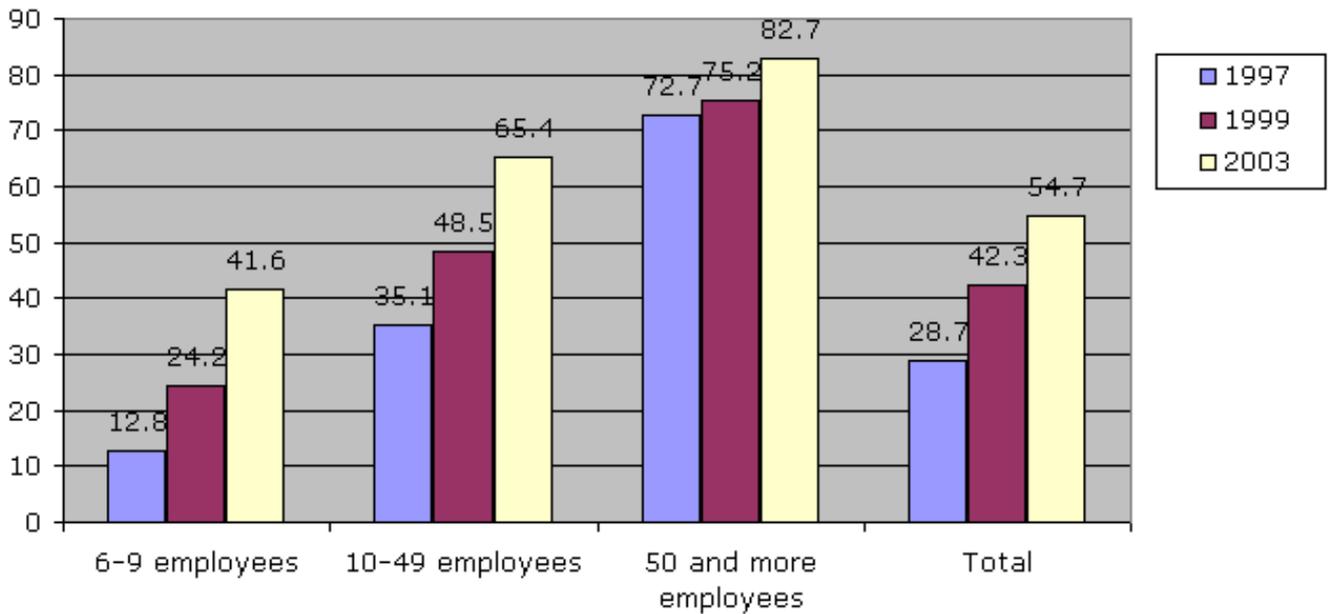
The main results of the survey are presented under three headings: preventive systems, working conditions, and health effects.

## **Preventive systems**

The current Spanish legal framework on labour risk prevention is relatively recent - see Law 31/1995, on Labour Risk Prevention, from 8 November 1995 ([Ley de Prevención de Riesgos Laborales](#) ) and Royal Decree 39/1997, from 17 January 1997, approving the Regulation on Preventive Services ([Reglamento de los Servicios de Prevención](#) ). Therefore, results from the Fifth National Survey show the encouraging finding that significant progress has been made in this particular domain since the previous survey in 1999.

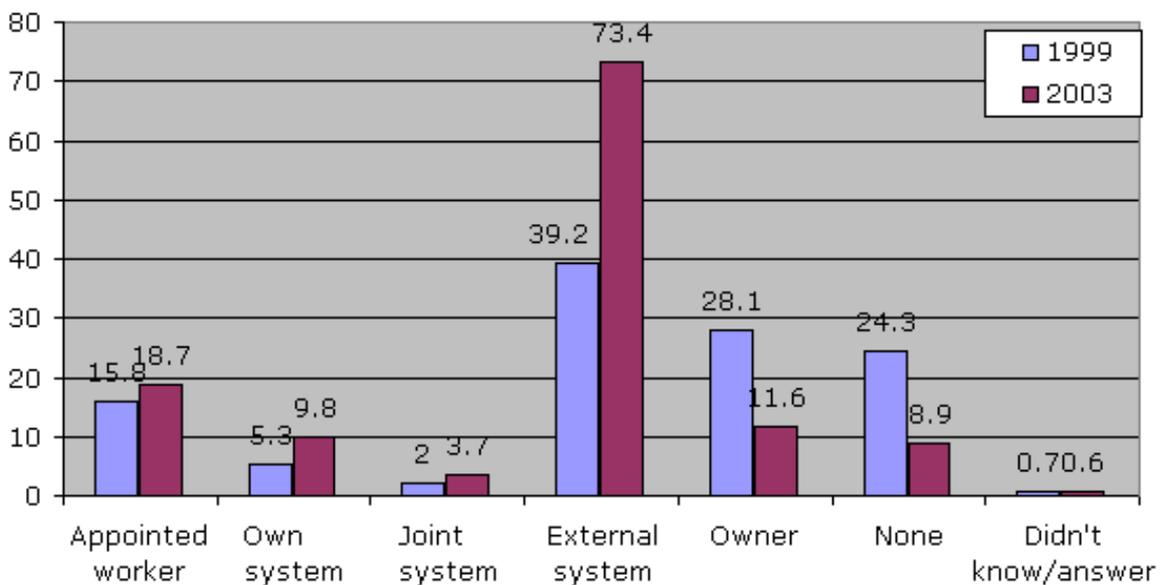
A generally positive trend can be seen in preventive resources since 1999. The presence and training of risk prevention representatives has increased (see Figure 1) along with the establishment of health and safety committees. These are now present in 90% of Spanish companies with more than 50 employees that have a risk prevention representative. All businesses with 50 or more employees are legally required (Art. 38, Law 31/1995, on Labour Risk Prevention) to establish such committees.

**Figure 1 Percentage of companies with a risk prevention representative, by company size, 1997, 1999 and 2003**



External prevention services are being used most commonly among Spanish businesses. The number of companies hiring outside resources has grown spectacularly from 39.2% of businesses in 1999 to 73.4% in 2003 (see Figure 2). These services include risk assessment (87.9% of enterprises), training of workers (63.7%), and information to workers (63.1%). Only 8.9% of Spanish firms have not adopted any preventive organisation, compared with 24.3% in 1999.

**Figure 2 Preventive resources, by percentage of businesses, 1999 and 2003**



With regard to large companies (more than 250 employees), 49% have their own prevention service, which generally comprises two or more preventive activities. It is worth emphasising that a significant change has been

reported in the last four years: even though safety at work is still the most important area, in 2003, ergonomics/applied psycho-sociology has grown considerably (see Table 1). This result is in line with the increase in the number of studies assessing working postures, physical efforts and repetitive movements.

**Table 1 Preventive activities in large companies (over 250 employees) with their own prevention systems, in 1999 and 2003 (%)**

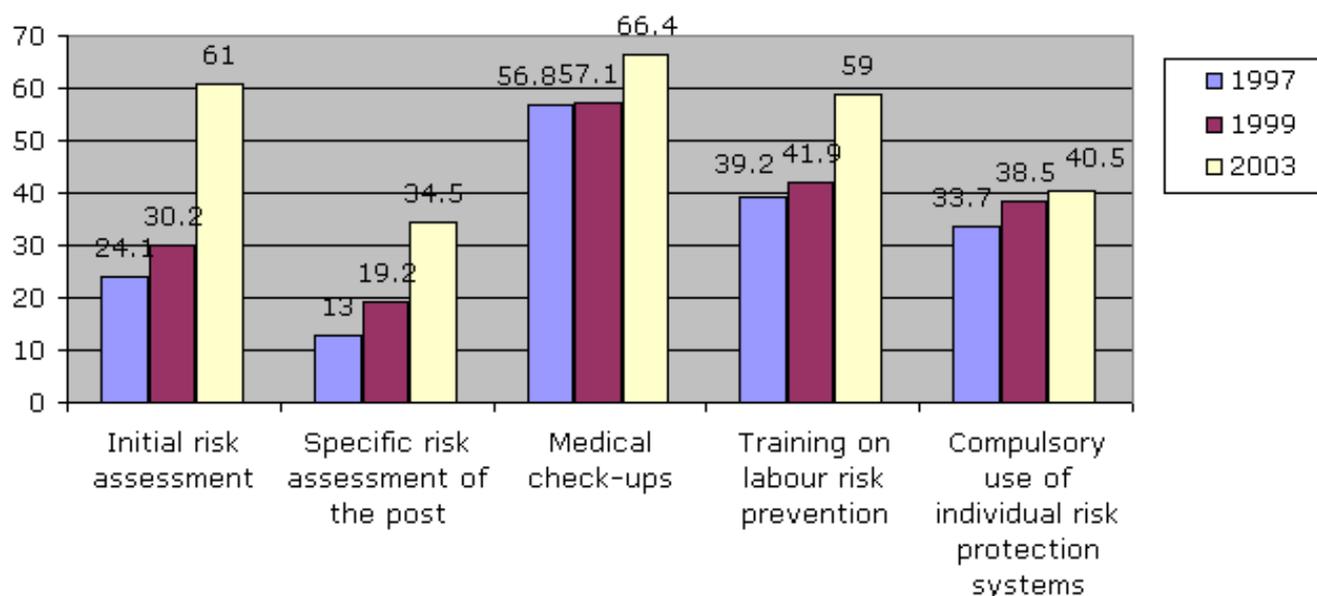
Preventive fields	1999	2003
Safety at work	93.3	94.3
Ergonomics/applied psycho-sociology	53.3	83.8
Industrial hygiene	53.3	62.7
Labour medicine	55.6	46.0

Source: Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions, Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene in the Workplace, Madrid, 2004

Integrating prevention across all levels of the organisation is key to fostering a genuine preventive culture. The results show an improvement from 1999, with almost half (45.1%) of all businesses in manufacturing and services reporting that their higher managers integrate labour risk prevention in all their activities and decisions. This compares with 27.8% in 1999. Middle managers and the heads of safety and health have reported similar trends. However, it should be noted that 32.4% of these businesses still do not feel obliged to take action in this regard. Nonetheless, this is an improvement on the 45% share that held this view in 1999.

Concerning preventive activities, evidence points towards a general increase in all indicators across all activity sectors. An initial assessment of risks was carried out by 61% of businesses in manufacturing and services, while 34.5% of workers reported that a specific study assessing the health and safety risks of their posts had been carried out in the year prior to the survey. Health monitoring is still the most common activity (66.4% of workers had a medical check-up in the year prior to the survey), while training on preventive issues has risen from 15.9% in 1999 to 29.8% of all workers in 2003. The use of protection systems has remained relatively close to the 1999 level of 40.5%, showing only slight increases (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3 Percentage of businesses carrying out certain preventive activities, 1997, 1999 and 2003**



It is worth noting too the growth in investment in new equipment, even if it is mainly for quality and productivity reasons rather than safety ones (Table 2). The effect on working conditions is positive, reducing labour risks.

**Table 2 Company reasons for investing in new material and equipment, 2003 (%)**

	First reason	Second reason
Improve product or service quality	44.9	32.3
Increase productivity	31.6	20.4
Comply with legislation on safety and health of workers	8.0	9.3
Launch of new products or services	3.8	13.9
Comply with environmental legislation	2.9	2.7
Other reasons	5.4	3.6
No answer given	3.5	17.9
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

Source: Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions, Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene in the Workplace, Madrid, 2004

In summary, it is fair to say that the preventive systems are being put in place, with a remarkable growth in resources and activities across all businesses and activity sectors.

## ***Working conditions***

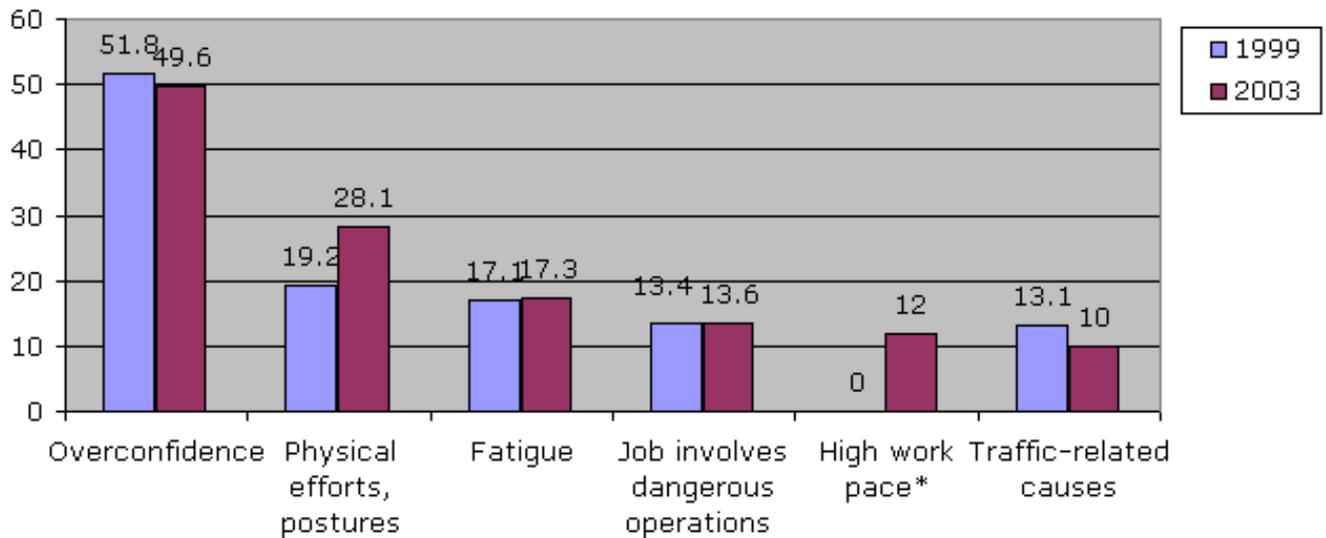
### **Physical demands**

The national survey's assessment of working conditions starts with the physical burdens that workers report experiencing, and their actual consequences. It is found that the most important physical burdens stem from maintaining the same posture and carrying out repetitive tasks, which lead to lower back pain (40.9% of all workers), neck pain (40%) and upper back pain (22.9%). Overall, 79.3% of all workers report suffering from some kind of musculoskeletal pain.

### **Safety conditions**

Concerning safety conditions, 73.7% of workers perceive a risk of accidents at work, a percentage similar to the 1999 issue of the survey (74%). The causes arise mainly from overconfidence rather than actual deficiencies of the job (see Figure 4). However, this perception seems to go down as a result of increased training and information on prevention.

**Figure 4 Causes of accident risks, in percentage share of workers, 1999 and 2003**



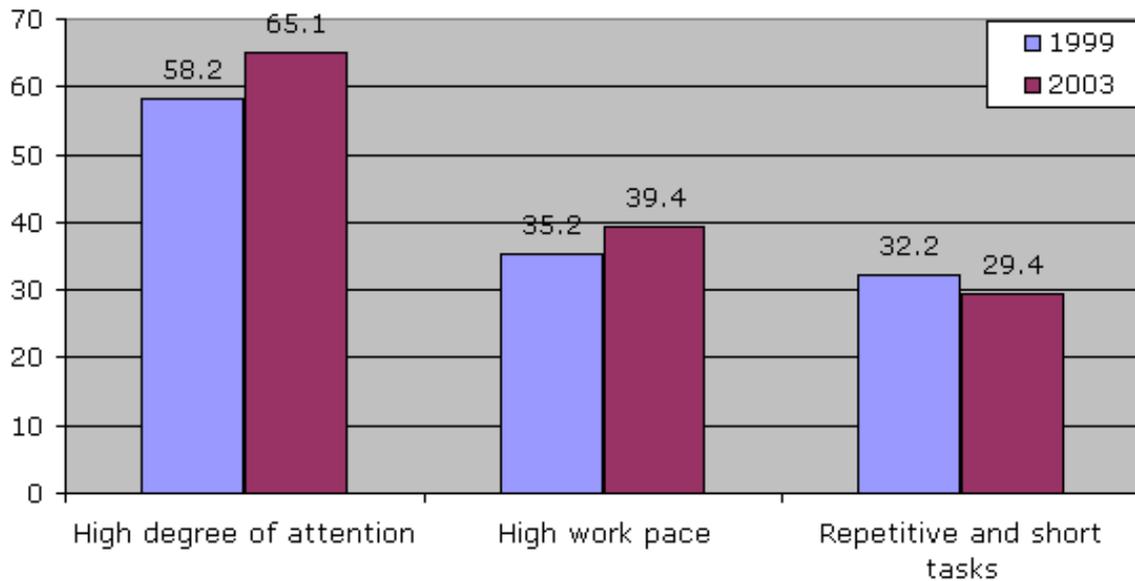
\* Work pace was not included in the 1999 survey

Chemical contaminants represent a growing threat for workers' safety and health, and have gradually increased since the first issue of the survey in 1987. More specifically, workers mention handling toxic products and substances (19% of surveyed workers) along with breathing/inhalation of dust, smoke, aerosol and toxic gases (22.3%).

### **Mental demands**

The fifth survey also provides information on required mental attention at work, revealing that there has been an increase in the requirement to keep both a high or very high degree of attention and a high work pace (see Figure 5). Workload has also gone up, as shown by the rise in the percentage of workers who rate it to be excessive (see Table 3 below).

**Figure 5 Mental demands: % of workers reporting these items for more than half of their working hours, 1999 and 2003**



The group of workers affected by all the aforementioned issues (both physical and mental) represents 5.1% of the total. This group endures high levels of work pressure, often reporting a series of psychosomatic effects (sleeping disorders, fatigue, headaches, lack of concentration, irritability, etc.) which are found to be at significantly greater levels than among those who are not subject to such high job demands.

**Table 3 Mental demands: Workload, monotony and consequences of mistakes at work, by % of workers, in 1999 and 2003**

Mental attention	1999	2003
Workload		
- Reduced	4.1	3.5
- Normal	58.9	54.8
- Excessive	14.5	17.8
- Very variable	22.3	23.7
Monotony		
- No	64.0	61.1
- Yes, sometimes	27.3	29.6
- Yes, frequently	4.7	5.5
- Yes, always	3.8	3.5
Consequences of mistakes		
- No consequence	32.6	23.1
- Minor consequences	42.7	46.2
- Major consequences	21.7	27.9

Source: Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions, Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene in the

## Psychosocial factors

Regarding psychosocial factors, workers report an increase in difficulties communicating with their colleagues during working time, mainly due to a high workload and work pace (see Table 4). Nonetheless, relations with bosses and colleagues are still rated to be good.

However, the degree of autonomy remains low. Almost one in three workers (29%) can never modify their working method, and 26% cannot choose when and for how long to take their breaks at work. Additionally, 25% of workers cannot alter their work pace.

**Table 4 Percentage of workers reporting difficulties communicating with colleagues and the reasons given for such obstacles, in 1997, 1999 and 2003**

	1997	1999	2003
Difficulties communicating with colleagues while working	27.8	27.6	31.5
Main reasons why communication is hindered:			
- Work pace	11.6	10.2	12.6
- High degree of attention required	9.7	9.1	11.7
- Being isolated	5.1	4.6	5.2
- Noise	4.3	5.6	5.1
- Physical distance	3.9	3.3	3.5
Source: Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions, Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene in the Workplace, Madrid, 2004.			

The fifth issue of the survey has included a new section devoted to violent behaviour and discrimination in the workplace, topics which have received growing attention in recent years. The three most frequent types of conduct reported under this heading are:

- physical violence from people outside work (1.93% of the surveyed workers report having personally experienced these situations during the last year);
- gender discrimination (0.73%);
- age discrimination (0.57%).

As far as psychological harassment is concerned, 2.8% of the surveyed workers have experienced (daily or at least once a week) at least one of the following: social isolation, threats, or personal/professional harm to their reputation. During the year prior to the survey, 4.5% suffered from these experiences at least once a month.

## Health effects

This section looks in more detail at the consequences of working conditions on health. Perceived morbidity has gone up since 1999, probably due to both the increased demands in working conditions, and workers' increased

awareness of health issues. In 2003, 15.7% of workers visited the doctor due to work-related health problems, compared with 13% in 1999. As has been mentioned above, back and neck pain constitute the main reasons to consult a doctor; these conditions stem from an excessive mental or physical workload (see Table 5).

**Table 5 Ailments leading to consulting a doctor, based on a % of all workers requiring doctor consultation, in 1999 and 2003**

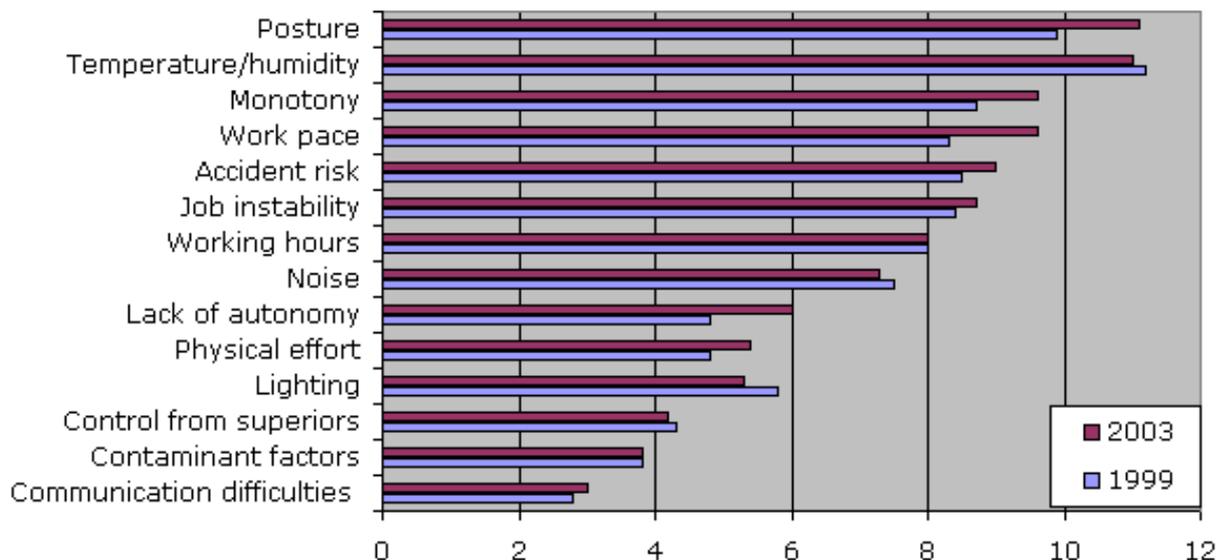
	1999	2003
Back pain	39.3	47.0
Neck pain	19.7	29.3
Upper limb pain	13.6	16.4
Stress	8.9	14.7
Headaches	7.0	14.0
Lower limb pain	12.5	13.0
Vision problems	18.3	11.7

Source: Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions, Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene in the Workplace, Madrid, 2004.

The survey also reveals an increase in the percentage of workers who report being ‘quite’ or ‘very’ bothered by their working conditions, mainly the physical burden (efforts and postures) and work organisation (lack of autonomy, work pace and monotony) (see Figure 6). This subjective self-assessment of working conditions by workers themselves allows for a cluster analysis from which workers may be classified into four different groups:

- ‘Good working conditions’, comprising 59% of workers (63.1% in 1999). This group has the highest percentage of permanent contracts, a low accident rate and few health problems.
- ‘Bad working conditions’, including 6.9% of workers, similar to the rate in 1999 (6.6%). This group is affected by problems of mental stress, accidents and morbidity. The group is relatively young, and sectors such as manufacturing (specifically in metal products) and social services have a strong presence.
- ‘Bothered by psychosocial issues and mental load’, representing 15.4% of surveyed workers, compared with 10.9% in 1999. Some 46.8% of this group are women, working mainly in the public administration and financial services sectors.
- ‘Bothered by physical load, noise, temperature/humidity and accident risk’, made up of 18.7% of all workers, similar to 1999 (19.5%). The construction sector is particularly affected, with its high rate of accidents and temporary contracts.

**Figure 6 Percentage of workers reporting those aspects to be 'bothering' or 'very bothering', 1999 and 2003**



## Methodology

The main methodological aspects of the Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions are shown in Table 6. The results were [presented at a seminar](#) in October, 2004. Further [background information on the survey](#) is available.

**Table 6 Details on the Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions**

Details	Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions
Survey name	Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions (V Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Trabajo)
Organisation in charge	Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene in the Workplace (subsidiary body of the Spanish Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs)
Frequency	Fifth issue. Previous issues were published in 1987, 1993, 1997 and 1999.
Geographic coverage	The whole of Spain except Ceuta and Melilla (Spanish territories in northern Africa)
Surveyed population	Businesses with more than one employee and across all activity sectors (except agriculture and mining)
Sample	9,290 interviews were carried out: 4,054 with managers and 5,236 with workers
Interviews	There are two questionnaires: a 'company' one, to be completed by someone from management, and a 'worker' one, to be completed by an employee (or two, for businesses with more than 250 employees). All interviews were carried out in person in the workplace
Date of fieldwork	Between 21 October 2002 and 31 January 2003, and

	carried out by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas)
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Source: Fifth National Survey on Working Conditions, Spanish National Institute of Safety and Hygiene in the Workplace, Madrid, 2004.

### **Commentary**

The five issues of the National Survey on Working Conditions (Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Trabajo) represent a well-established research tool for the assessment of working conditions in Spain. Nevertheless, it should be noted that their scope focuses primarily on workers' health. To get an overall picture of the whole situation requires combining its results with those from other surveys (i.e. the Survey on Life Quality in the Workplace).

Results from the different issues provide an overview of trends in working conditions in Spain since 1987 and, for data comparability, the questionnaires have remained relatively stable throughout the five surveys. However, new topics have been included (such as psycho-social issues) in response to changes taking place in production and service provision, and the equipment and materials used by companies and in business organisation.

As far as the actual results of the fifth survey are concerned, the analysis points to an increase in the real or potential damage to workers' health. Trends in recent years suggest the need to control those elements that may well produce negative or harmful effects. Notwithstanding this, the observed reinforcement in the preventive system should lead to the necessary preventive activities that will protect the health and safety of Spanish workers.

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