

Ten Often-ignored Office Hazards

When most people think about industrial safety, the images that come to mind are of massive machinery in factories, the inherent dangers of construction sites, or the destructive potential of power tools.

By comparison, office environments would appear to be safe havens, but that's actually not the case. Tens of thousands of office workers suffer injuries or work-related health problems that lead to lost time every year. While the potential for injury may not be as dramatic as on a factory floor or a major construction site, it can be every bit as costly to employers. And the safety-related strategies that have been proven to be successful in industrial settings are just as applicable when it comes to preventing lost-time issues in the office. Here are some of the most common office hazards and practical strategies for keeping injuries and illnesses to a minimum.

Slipping and falling

If you don't believe that slipping, tripping, and falling are big issues in offices, consider that the National Safety Council has reported that people are two and half times more likely to have a disabling fall in an office environment than in any other part of the workplace. In fact, slips, falls, and trips are the single most common source of office injuries — and nearly all are preventable.

One of the biggest factors in this type of injury is workers using improper ways to reach objects in high places. Often, they'll climb on office chairs that roll out from under them. Employees who need to access objects on high shelves or in tall cabinets should use stepladders (and remember never to climb higher than what's indicated on the ladder). Desks, tables, and other types of furniture are unsafe substitutes for ladders.



Another major factor in trips and falls is wiring that runs through or near traffic areas. Any wiring that is not permanently installed should be protected so that workers' feet won't become entangled.

Finally, flooring choices play a key role in slips and falls. Upturned edges on carpets or mats invite tripping. Surfaces such as tile and terrazzo can become slick when wet or dusty. In addition to proper cleaning, the use of mats at exterior doors will keep workers and visitors from tracking in rain and snow that can contribute to slippery conditions.

Collisions and obstacles

Another contributor to trips and falls is the clutter that can be found next to desks, in hallways, inside storage areas, and anywhere else that seems to be "out of the way." A worker who is

focused on a task may not look down and notice the hazard in time to prevent a fall. File and desk drawers that are left open are also ready to injure unsuspecting workers.

Even the workers themselves can be a hazard. Blind corners or cubicle walls may prevent workers from seeing each other as they emerge into hallways or other common areas. Placing convex mirrors at such intersections can minimize this type of collision.

Misusing equipment

We have already mentioned the dangers of using office chairs as stepstools, but chairs can also be dangerous in several other ways. Wheeled chairs are usually designed for small movements in a limited area. Racing across wide areas invites the possibility of collisions or tripping over obstacles. Leaning back on a wheeled chair may cause it to flip over.

Chairs and desks wear out just like any other types of equipment, but companies are often reluctant to replace them when they do. However, broken or missing casters and other parts can make a chair or desk dangerously unstable. To prevent accidents caused by damaged equipment, it should be inspected regularly, and any deficiencies should be repaired or replaced immediately.

Time-saving office tools can also cause injuries when used carelessly or incorrectly. Blades on paper cutters are extremely sharp and can cause serious injuries to an unwary user. Scissors or sharpened pencils that are stored without thought can puncture a worker who reaches into a drawer. Cuts and punctures must be treated properly to reduce the chance of infections.

Stacking and lifting

Stacking file boxes and other materials can be convenient, but it can also create a significant hazard in the office. If an employee bumps into the stack, it can topple over and fall on someone. Stacking materials also increases the likelihood that an employee will lift or retrieve the materials incorrectly, leading to sprain or strain-type injury.

For that reason, it's important to store materials properly, and to ensure that they are not placed so high that they present a hazard. Once again, if employees have to access something in a high location, they should use an appropriate ladder for the task. Heavy objects should always be stored on or near the floor, so they're less likely to fall on a worker's foot.

Repetitive stressors

Thanks to technology, workers are less physically active than they were in past generations. Many office jobs involve eight hours in front of a computer screen and little movement beyond manipulating a mouse. While that has done wonders for productivity, it's also led to a dramatic increase in injuries related to repetitive movement and other ergonomic factors. Complicating the issue is the fact that many of those injuries are cumulative over time and not easy to detect on a day-to-day basis.

The key to avoiding the injuries is to take a proactive approach. Investing in equipment that provides the proper ergonomics and training employees on how to use it correctly will do more

than merely reduce lost-time injuries — it can improve morale and productivity. Don't give in to the temptation to buy office chairs and desks by price alone, because you may end up paying far more down the road when workers lose weeks for treatment of injuries.

Poor lighting

Office lighting may not seem to be a hazard, but it can be a significant contributor to a host of hazards and illnesses. An obvious issue is inadequate lighting that conceals hazards. Poor lighting in hallways and storage rooms is an example.

But one of the less recognized issues related to office lighting involves the areas in which tasks are being performed. Poor lighting in offices can contribute to vision problems such as eyestrain and related headaches in the short term, and impaired vision if the problem remains uncorrected. It can also be a factor in increased worker stress, which may reduce productivity and increase susceptibility to illness. Poorly designed office lighting also creates shadows and glare. Some vision experts recommend less reliance on bright overhead lights and a greater use of task lighting at each workstation.

Computer screens are a major source of vision-related problems. Placing monitors slightly below eye level and about two feet from workers' faces can reduce eyestrain, as can eliminating sources of glare and using larger fonts on the screen. Many optometrists are now recommending special glasses for frequent computer users. However, one of the best weapons against eyestrain is also one of the simplest: following OSHA's guideline to take 10 minutes away from the screen for every hour spent in front of it.

Noise pollution

Offices can be surprisingly noisy places. Even though the noise levels workers encounter typically aren't intense enough to cause hearing loss, they can be a key contributor to stress and detract from morale.

Designing offices to separate workers from noisy equipment such as printers and ventilation equipment can help. In addition, increasing the distance between workstations or using noise-absorbing materials such as cubicle walls, carpeting, and acoustic tile can also lower the volume.

Fire hazards

Offices contain more fire hazards than most managers realize. In addition, beyond the potential for injuries and death, office fires can destroy valuable documents and equipment, so preventing against fires should be a high priority. Many materials used in offices are highly combustible, and some emit toxic fumes when burning.

Managers should conduct regular inspections to identify fire hazards and ways to minimize them. That can include everything from checking all the cords that are plugged into electrical outlets to making sure that fire extinguishers are easily accessible. Electrical defects are a primary cause of office fires, so pay particular attention to the integrity of extension cords and

wiring, and make sure that electrical equipment (especially space heaters) is not dangerously close to combustible items.

Employee training is also critical. How many workers in your office have received training in the basic use of fire extinguishers? While that type of training is a normal requirement for construction and manufacturing workers, it's rare for companies to expect the same from their office staff.

Safe egress

In the event of an emergency, workers must be able to exit the office immediately and safely. That's why it's important to make sure that fire doors and escape routes don't become blocked by furniture or boxes. Emergency exits should also be properly marked, and all employees should know where the nearest exit can be found.

When a fire alarm sounds, quickly and calmly use the nearest exit and move at least 100' from the building. Failure to exit the building when a fire alarm sounds is illegal and can result in a fine from the City of Madison Fire Department.