

JUNE IS NATIONAL SAFETY AWARENESS MONTH



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RECOGNIZING HIDDEN DANGERS: TIPS FOR A SAFER WORKPLACE



It's fairly obvious that safety and health hazards can exist on worksites filled with heavy machinery and equipment, where employees often are required to engage in strenuous manual labor.

A job where most of the work tasks are completed while sitting in a chair in a climate-controlled office building would seem less fraught with danger. However, a surprising number of hazards can be present in an office setting.

According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 80,410 private-industry office and administrative workers suffered on-the-job injuries in 2008. Many of these injuries could have been prevented had workers or supervisors recognized the risks and implemented simple workplace modifications to help mitigate them.

Here are some steps you can take to reduce the risk of injury among your office staff:

Stay clutter-free

Boxes, files and various items piled in walkways can create a tripping hazard, according to OSHA. Be certain that all materials are safely stored in their proper location to prevent buildup of clutter in walkways. Further, in addition to posing an electrical hazard, stretching cords across walkways or under rugs creates a tripping hazard, so ensure all cords are properly secured and covered.

Step on up

Standing on chairs – particularly rolling office chairs – is a significant fall hazard. Workers who need to reach something at an elevated height should use a stepladder. The Chicago-based American Ladder Institute cautions that stepladders must be fully opened and placed on level, firm ground. Workers should never climb higher than the step indicated as the highest safe standing level.



FALLS AT THE WORKPLACE

Slips, trips and falls, the most common type of office injury, sidelined 25,790 workers in 2008, according to BLS. Several hazards contribute to these injuries, although most can be significantly reduced, often by raising awareness among employees.



Maintain a clear line of vision

Workers can collide when making turns in the hallways and around blind corners or cubicle walls. The National Safety Council suggests installing convex mirrors at intersections to help reduce collisions. If workers can see who is coming

Get a grip

Carpeting and other skid-resistant surfaces can serve to reduce falls. Marble or tile can become very slippery – particularly when wet, according to the National Safety Council. Placing carpets down can be especially helpful at entranceways, where workers are likely to be coming in with shoes wet from rain or snow.

Shut the drawer

File cabinets with too many fully extended drawers could tip over if they are not secured, the council warns. Additionally, open drawers on desks and file cabinets pose a tripping hazard, so be sure to always completely close drawers when not in use.

Safe stacking

According to the Office of Compliance, which oversees the safety of U.S. congressional workers, proper storage of heavy items can help reduce the number of office injuries. Large stacks of materials and heavy equipment can cause major injuries if they are knocked over. OOC recommends storing heavy objects close to the floor, and warns that the load capacity of shelves or storage units should never be exceeded.

Correctly position monitors

Prevent Blindness America recommends workers place their computer monitors slightly below eye level and 20-26 inches from their eyes. Screens that can tilt or swivel are especially beneficial. Your eyes' resting position is a few degrees below the horizon when you're looking straight ahead.

Minimize screen glare

The American Optometric Association points to screen glare as a major cause of eyestrain in the office. To minimize strain, avoid positioning monitors opposite open windows, or be sure to always close shades or blinds. A glare reduction filter also can be used.

Never block fire sprinklers

Furniture and tall stacks of materials can block the range of fire sprinklers, reducing their effectiveness in the event of an emergency. Objects should never be placed higher than 18 inches below sprinkler heads to allow a full range of coverage, according to the Office of Compliance.



Falls are the most common source of injury in an office, although workers also are injured by being struck by or against objects, and suffering ergonomic injuries.

Some simple changes to the workspace can be effective in eliminating hazards and reducing the number of injuries.

Administrative interventions such as scheduled walk-throughs and the establishment of a formal reporting system can help protect workers in an office environment.

Inspect space heaters

If employees use space heaters, verify the devices are approved for commercial use and have a switch that automatically shuts off the heater if the heater is tipped over, the Office of Compliance suggests. Further, make sure space heaters are not powered through an extension cord or placed near combustible materials such as paper.

Conduct walk-throughs

Periodically walking around the office can help with hazard recognition and maintenance of ergonomic task design. Employers might conduct an ergonomics screen of every workstation at least once a year. “Employee complaints are invaluable in the process, but yearly reassessments can help to ensure that a good fit is maintained between employee and workstation,” he said.

