

Chapter 3 OFFICE SAFETY

Introduction

The following sections provide general safety guidelines and procedures for office safety. This chapter covers the following topics:

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General Office Safety

A large percentage of workplace accidents and injuries occur in office buildings. Like the shop or laboratory, the office requires a few preventive measures to ensure a safe and healthful environment. Common causes of office accidents include the following:

- Slipping, tripping, and falling hazards
- Burning, cutting, and pinching hazards
- Improper lifting and handling techniques
- Unobservant and inattentive employees
- Improper office layout and arrangement
- Dangerous electrical wiring
- Exposure to toxic substances
- Horseplay

The following sections address several office safety practices. Other preventive measures not mentioned here might be necessary also.

REMEMBER:

The office building is not a sterile working environment; common workplace hazards can be extra dangerous when you ignore them.

Refer to other chapters in this manual, such as Electrical Safety, General Safety, Fire Safety, and others for more information on workplace safety. Always use common sense when safety is a concern.

Good Housekeeping Practices

Many office accidents are caused by poor housekeeping practices. By keeping the office floor both neat and clean, you can eliminate most slipping, tripping, and falling hazards. Other good housekeeping practices include the following:

- Ensure that office lighting is adequate and available. Replace burned out light bulbs, and have additional lighting installed, as necessary.
- Ensure that electrical cords and phone cords do not cross walkways or otherwise pose a tripping hazard. If you cannot move a cord, have a new outlet installed or secure the cord to the floor with cord covering strips. Do not tape cords down or run them underneath carpet.

- Report or repair tripping hazards such as defective tiles, boards, or carpet to the EH & S officer or Physical Plant immediately.
- Clean spills and pick up fallen debris immediately. Even a loose pencil or paper clip could cause a serious falling injury.
- Keep office equipment, facilities, and machines in good condition.
- Store items in an approved storage space. Take care to not stack boxes too high or too tight. Ensure that boxes are clearly labeled with their contents.

Hazardous Objects and Materials

Hazardous objects such as knives and firearms are not permitted in the workplace. In addition, hazardous chemicals and materials should not be stored in the general office. Hazardous materials include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Carcinogens
- Combustibles
- Flammables
- Gas cylinders
- Irritants
- Oxidizers
- Reactives

Preventing Cuts and Punctures

Cuts and punctures happen when people use everyday office supplies without exercising care. Follow these guidelines to help reduce the chance for cuts and punctures:

- When sealing envelopes, use a liquid dispenser, not your tongue.
- Be careful when using kitchen knives, scissors, staplers, letter openers, and box openers. Any of these items could cause a painful injury.
- Avoid picking up broken glass with your bare hands. Wear gloves and use a broom and a dustpan.
- Place used blades or broken glass in a rigid container, such as a box, before disposing in a wastebasket.

Preventing Machine Accidents

Only use machines that you know how to operate. Never attempt to operate an unfamiliar machine without reading the machine instructions or receiving directions from a qualified employee. In addition, follow these guidelines to ensure machine safety:

- Secure machines that tend to move during operation.
- Do not place machines near the edge of a table or desk.
- Ensure that machines with moving parts are guarded to prevent accidents. Do not remove these guards.
- Unplug defective machines and have them repaired immediately.
- Do not use any machine that smokes, sparks, shocks, or appears defective in any way.
- Close hand-operated paper cutters after each use and activate the guard.
- Take care when working with copy machines. If you have to open the machine for maintenance, repair, or troubleshooting, remember that some parts may be hot. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions for troubleshooting.
- Unplug paper shredders before conducting maintenance, repair, or troubleshooting.

Some items can be very dangerous when worn around machinery with moving parts. Avoid wearing the following items around machines within unguarded moving parts:

- Loose clothing

- Jewelry
- Long, loose hair

Preventing Slips and Falls

As outlined in the General Safety chapter of this manual, the easiest way to avoid slips and falls is to pay attention to your surroundings and to avoid running or rushing. To ensure safety for others in the office, however, follow these guidelines:

- Arrange office furnishings in a manner that provides unobstructed areas for movement.
- Keep stairs, steps, flooring, and carpeting well maintained.
- Ensure that glass doors have some type of marking to keep people from walking into them.
- Clearly mark any difference in floor level that could cause an accident.
- Secure throw rugs and mats to prevent slipping hazards.
- Do not place wastebaskets or other objects in walkways.

Preventing Stress

To reduce stress and prevent fatigue, it is important to take short breaks throughout the day. If possible, change tasks at least once every two hours. Stretch your arms, neck, and legs often if you do the same type of work for long periods of time. Rest your eyes often by closing them or looking at something other than the work at hand. For a quick pick-me-up, breathe deeply several times by inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. In addition, always try to eat your lunch somewhere other than your desk.

Other examples of stress-relieving exercises that can be done at your desk include the following:

- **Head and Neck Stretch:**
Slowly turn your head to the left, and hold it for three seconds. Slowly turn your head to the right, and hold it for three seconds. Drop your chin gently towards your chest, and then tilt it back as far as you can. Repeat these steps five to ten times.
- **Shoulder Roll:**
Roll your shoulders forward and then backward using a circular motion.
- **Upper Back Stretch:**
Grasp one arm below the elbow and pull gently towards the other shoulder. Hold this position for five seconds and then repeat with the other arm.
- **Wrist Wave:**
With your arms extended in front of you, raise and lower your hands several times.
- **Finger Stretch:**
Make fists with your hands and hold tight for one second, and then spread your fingers wide for five seconds.

Equipment Safety

As mentioned earlier, common office machines, such as the following, require special safety consideration: copiers, microwaves, adding machines, typewriters, and computers. Be sure you know how to operate these machines before using them, and never use one of these machines if you think it is defective.

Other office equipment that requires safety consideration includes furniture, such as file cabinets and shelves, desks, and chairs.

File Cabinets and Shelves

Because file cabinets and shelves tend to support heavy loads, treat them with special care.

Follow these safety guidelines for file cabinets:

- Secure file cabinets that are not weighted at the bottom. Either bolt them to the floor or to the wall.
- Ensure that file cabinet drawers cannot easily be pulled clear of the cabinet.
- Do not block ventilation grates with file cabinets.
- Open only one drawer at a time to keep the cabinet from toppling.
- Close drawers when they are not in use.
- Do not place heavy objects on top of cabinets. Be aware that anything on top of a cabinet may fall off if a drawer is opened suddenly.
- Close drawers slowly using the handle to avoid pinched fingers.
- Keep the bottom drawer full. This will help stabilize the entire cabinet.

In addition, follow these safety guidelines for office shelves:

- Secure shelves by bolting them to the floor or wall.
- Place heavy objects on the bottom shelves. This will keep the entire structure more stable.
- Ensure that there is at least 18 inches between the top shelf items and the ceiling. This space will allow ceiling sprinklers (if present) to function properly if a fire occurs.
- Do not block ventilation grates with shelves.
- Never climb on shelves (even lower shelves). Use an approved ladder.

Desks

Follow these safety guidelines for office desks:

- Keep desks in good condition (i.e., free from sharp edges, nails, etc.).
- Ensure that desks do not block exits or passageways.
- Ensure that glass-top desks do not have sharp edges.
- Ensure that desks with spring-loaded tables function properly. The table should not spring forth with enough force to cause an injury.
- Do not climb on desks. Use an approved ladder.
- Keep desk drawers closed when not in use.
- Repair or report any desk damage that could be hazardous.

Chairs

Safety guidelines for office chairs include the following:

- Do not lean back in office chairs, particularly swivel chairs with rollers.
- Do not climb on any office chair. Use an approved ladder.
- Office desk chairs should have adjustable back supports and seat height. Make sure that your chair's back support position and seat height are comfortable.
- Take care when sitting in a chair with rollers. Make sure it does not roll out from under you when you sit down.
- Repair or report any chair damage that could be hazardous.
- Do not roll chairs over electrical cords.

Ladders

Always use an approved ladder or stool to reach any item above your extended arm height. Never use a makeshift device, such as a desktop, file cabinet, bookshelf, or box, as a substitute for a ladder.

Follow these guidelines when using ladders:

- Do not load a ladder above its intended weight capacity.
- Place ladders on slip-free surfaces even if they have slip-resistant feet. Secure the ladder if a slip-free surface is not available.
- Avoid placing ladders in walkways. Secure a ladder if its location could cause an accident.
- Keep areas around ladders clean and free of debris.
- Do not use a ladder in front of a door unless the door is locked and barricaded.

Refer to the Shop Safety chapter in this manual for more information on ladder safety.

Work Station Arrangement

With the extensive use of computers and other automated desk devices in the workplace, employees must take special care to ensure proper workstation arrangement. For the purpose of this manual, a workstation consists of the equipment and furniture associated with a typical desk job (i.e., desk, chair, and computer components).

In recent years, computer screens or Video Display Terminals (VDTs) have received much attention concerning nonionizing radiation levels. Tests prove, however, that VDTs do not emit harmful levels of radiation. Improper workstation arrangement combined with repetitive motion, however, may contribute to visual and musculoskeletal fatigue.

Cumulative trauma disorders, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, may result from the stress of repetitive motion. Therefore, it is very important to arrange your workstation properly and to take breaks frequently.

The following sections offer recommendations for ensuring employee comfort through proper workstation arrangement.

Operator's Position

Your seating position at work is important to your comfort and safety. To reduce the painful effects of repetitive motion, follow these guidelines when working with computers or typewriters:

- Always sit up straight. Make sure your chair is adjusted to provide adequate support to your back.
- Place your feet flat on the floor or on a footrest. Lower legs should be approximately vertical, and thighs should be approximately horizontal. The majority of your weight should be on the buttocks.
- Ensure that there is at least 1 inch of clearance between the top of your thighs and the bottom of the desk or table.
- Keep your wrists in a natural position. They should not rest on the edge of the desk.
- Keep the front edge of your chair approximately 4 inches behind your knees.

Equipment Arrangement

By properly arranging your equipment, you can also help reduce the harmful effects of repetitive motion. Follow these guidelines for arranging office equipment:

- Lighting:

Lighting around computer workstations should illuminate the work area without obscuring the VDT or causing glare. Position computer screens, draperies, blinds, and pictures to reduce glare during work hours (e.g., place the VDT screen at a right angle to the window).

- VDT Screen:

VDT images should be clear and well defined. Adjust the screen's brightness, contrast and display size to meet your needs. If a screen flickers or jumps, have it repaired or replaced.

Place the VDT 20-28 inches away from your face. The center of the VDT should be approximately 15 to 25 degrees below your line of vision.

- Keyboards:

Position computer keyboards so that the angle between the forearm and upper arm is between 80 and 120 degrees. Place the keyboard in an area that is accessible and comfortable.

- Wrist Support::

Use wrist supports made of a padded material. The support should allow you to type without bending your wrists.

- Document Holders:

Keep documents at approximately the same height and distance from your face as the VDT screen.

- Telephones:

Neck tension is a common problem caused by holding the telephone between the head and neck. Use a headset or speakerphone if you use the telephone for extended periods of time.