Office Safety and Training

SafetyNet #: 148

Office workers are often not initially thought of as being very susceptible to injury because they are not performing traditional higher hazard and risky physical labor tasks. The fact is office personnel are still exposed to hazards, which must be identified by inspection, hazard analysis and reporting. These hazards must be controlled through equipment changes, training, employee awareness and behavior, ergonomic adjustments and administrative controls.

Office Staff Training

1. Office Staff are required to take the laboratory safety training if:
   - Working in a laboratory. The course is ‘UC Laboratory Safety Fundamentals’, course # UCLSF-DA-ECO-SAFSVC
   - Performing ancillary lab tasks in the lab (i.e. delivering packages or chemicals). The course is ‘Lab Safety for Support Personnel’, course # DACS-UCLOL0014-UC-ELO-SAFSUC.
   - These are Learning Management System (LMS) classes accessed at lms.ucdavis.edu [1]. Employees need to have a Kerberos and passphrase to access classes. Office personnel are also required to wear the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) identified by hazard assessment when working in the lab.

2. Anyone handling chemicals (including delivery) must also take the LMS Hazard Communication course (lms.ucdavis.edu [1]), course # DACS-UCLOL0012-SAFSVC. Office safety training is a requirement per your departmental Cal/OSHA (regulation 8 CCR 3203) Injury & Illness Prevention Program (IIPP) which requires:
   - Office employees and supervisors/PI/DSC to identify hazards in the workplace, document and implement hazard controls. One way is to have employees conduct office safety inspections at least annually. The Safety Inspection Form [2] can be used to assign and schedule inspections to designated employees using a calendaring feature like MS Outlook calendar to systematically perform inspections.
   - EH&S recommends training employees and linking access to two, or similar, forms on your departmental website:
     - Hazard Alert Form [3] for employees to report workplace hazards
     - Hazard Correction Form [4] to document mitigation of the hazard

3. Office employees must be trained on reporting injuries and illnesses immediately, especially for lingering repetitive motion pain and discomfort at computer work stations. Please use the injury and illness electronic reporting form [5].
4. Employees who climb safety steps and other ladders should never use a chair or stool as a replacement for a safety step ladder, and should take the ladder safety training course on LMS [1]. The course # is DACU-GOTRO448-SAFSVC.

5. Office employees need training on how to properly adjust their own work station office equipment: chairs, keyboards, mouse, monitors, etc. Employees can learn the most ergonomically beneficial way to set up their workstation by accessing the UC Davis ergonomic website [6] and conducting a self-assessment of their PC work station set-up.

Office Safety Hazards:
The following are actions to reduce the risk of injury among your office staff:

1. **Slips, Trips and Falls**: Slips, trips and falls are the most common type of office injury. The National Safety Council says employees are 2.5 times more likely to suffer a disabling fall in an office setting than anywhere else. Several hazards contribute to these injuries and most can be significantly reduced, often by raising awareness among employees.

   - **Storage**: Boxes, files and various items piled in walkways can create a tripping hazard. Be certain all materials are safely stored in their proper location to prevent buildup of clutter in walkways.

   - **Extension Cords**: Stretching cords across walkways or under rugs creates a tripping hazard. Ensure all cords are properly secured and covered and never daisy-chain extension cords. Section V of the electrical safety policy & procedure [7] requirements explains the extension cord requirements.

   - **Reaching**: Standing on chairs, particularly rolling office chairs, is a significant fall hazard. Employees who need to reach something at an elevated height should use a stepladder. 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.

   - **Clear line of vision**: Employees can collide when making turns in hallways and around blind corners or cubicle walls. Consider installing convex mirrors at intersections to help reduce collisions.

   - **Desk Drawers and file cabinets**: Open drawers on desks and file cabinets create a tripping hazard, be sure to always completely close drawers when not in use.

   - **Carpeting**: Carpeting and other skid-resistant surfaces can serve to reduce slips and falls. Marble or tile can become very slippery, particularly when wet. Carpets or mats can be especially helpful at entranceways.

2. **Struck or caught by**: Another major type of injury in the office setting comes from workers being struck by or caught by an object.

   - **Protrusions**: Keep sharp edges of shelves or other objects from protruding into aisle ways or corridors.

   - **Shut the drawer**: File cabinets with too many fully extended drawers can tip over if not secured.

   - **Safe stacking**: Large stacks of materials and heavy equipment can cause major injuries if they are knocked or topple over. Store heavy objects from mid-height or slightly closer to the floor. The load capacity of shelves or storage units should never be exceeded.
3. **Ergonomics injuries:** One of the most prevalent injuries in an office setting are ergonomics-related. Office workers spend a large percentage of their day seated at a desk and working on a computer. These employees are prone to strains and other injuries related to poor posture and repetitive motion. Ergonomics hazards can be difficult to detect, but some basic mitigation measures are:

- **Adjustable equipment:** One size does not fit all in an office workstation. Providing adjustable chairs, work surfaces, monitor stands, etc. will accommodate a wide range of employees.

- **Keep your feet on the floor:** One of the first questions to ask workers is whether their feet touch the floor when seated at their desk. Very often workers have their keyboard tray on the desktop, so in order to reach it, they need to jack up their chair so high their feet can barely touch the floor. Unless an employee’s feet are on the floor, a chair will not be able to reduce pain and discomfort. EH&S recommends options like adjustable keyboard trays or adjustable rolling tables to eliminate this problem. Although footrests are a “second-best option,” their small surface may impede some of the worker’s movement.

- **Provide document holders:** Frequently typing from hard copy can lead to neck strain if a worker is forced to repeatedly look left or right and then back to the computer screen. Providing in-line document holders reduces this strain. Keeping reference materials close to the monitor reduces the need for your eyes to change focus as you look from the document to the monitor.

- **Correct mouse placement:** EH&S often sees workstations where the computer keyboard is on a tray, but the mouse remains on the desk. That can greatly irritate the neck and shoulder on the side with the mouse. The mouse should always be placed beside the keyboard.

- **Vision problems:** Although looking at a computer monitor cannot damage your eyes, spending a large portion of your workday at the computer can cause eyestrain. A few work area adjustments can help alleviate this issue.

  - **Dim the lights and use task lamps:** Fluorescent lights in office buildings can be too bright for optimal vision. Light that is at about half-normal office levels is preferred and can be achieved by removing some bulbs from overhead fixtures. If more light is needed, provide individual task lamps rather than increasing overall lighting.

  - **Correctly position monitors:** Computer monitors should be slightly below eye level and 20-26 inches (approx. arms-length) from the eyes. Screens that can tilt or swivel are especially beneficial.

  - **Minimize screen glare:** Screen glare can be a major cause of eyestrain in the office. Minimize strain by avoiding positioning monitors opposite open windows or closing shades or blinds. A glare reduction filter also can be used.

  - **Wear the right glasses:** Employees should tell their eye doctor if they spend a large portion of the day working on the computer. The doctor can check the efficiency of vision at 20-30 inches, the typical distance a computer monitor should be placed. Glasses are available for computer use allowing the wearer to see the full monitor without having to excessively strain the neck.

  - **Increase font size on computer:** Small font sizes on the computer can strain your vision,
back, shoulder and neck as workers tend to pull the head forward to view smaller print. A simple adjustment to the font size on the computer screen can eliminate the need for this. Take a break: Giving your eyes a rest and allowing them to focus on things at varying distances can help reduce strain and fatigue. OSHA recommends workers take a 10-minute break for every hour spent on the computer.

Fire Safety:

1. **Maintain cords in good repair:** Damaged and ungrounded power cords pose a serious fire hazard and violate fire codes. Cords should be inspected regularly for wear and taken out of service if they are frayed or have exposed wire. Cords should also never be used if the third prong has been damaged or removed. The most common causes of fires started by extension cords are improper use and overloading. Extension cords should be approved by a certifying laboratory such as Underwriters Laboratories and only used temporarily to connect one device at a time.

2. **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 it is tipped over. Make sure space heaters are not powered through an extension cord or placed near combustible materials such as paper.

3. **Never block fire sprinklers:** Furniture, shelving and tall stacks of materials can block the range of fire sprinklers, reducing their effectiveness in the event of an emergency. Objects must never be placed higher than 18 inches below sprinkler heads.

4. **Do not block escape routes or prop open fire doors:** Items should never be stored along an emergency exit route. These paths should remain free of clutter, according to Cal/OSHA. Fire doors should not be held open by unapproved means (such as with a door stop or chair), as this creates a significant fire hazard.

Administrative controls:

*In addition to employee training and improved equipment, certain administrative controls can aid hazard recognition and the elimination of potentially dangerous situations.*

1. **Conduct walk-throughs:** Periodically walking around the office can help with hazard recognition and maintenance of ergonomic task design. EH&S recommends employers conduct an ergonomics screen of every workstation at least once a year.

2. **Monitor signs of musculoskeletal disorders (MSD):** Recognizing the symptoms of MSD can alert employees of the need to make ergonomics alterations to their workstation. MSD injuries develop from poor ergonomics and can start out asymptomatically and become quite severe by the time an employee starts to experience symptoms. Employees need to pay attention to any pain, fatigue, numbness or weakness. These may be signs of an ergonomics problem and the start of a more serious MSD.

3. **Talk to employees about their concerns:** Asking employees how they are feeling can go a long way toward recognizing hazards. Take advantage of the cases where employees are experiencing symptoms like discomfort and fatigue early on, when quick, inexpensive interventions can usually solve the problem. Ignoring these early warning signs can lead to prolonged employee suffering, extended absenteeism and in some cases very high costs.

4. **Establish alternate employee reporting systems:** In addition to using the aforementioned ‘Hazard Alerts’ form consider establishing an anonymous employee
reporting system to get a handle on potential hazards before they cause injury.

References/Resources

- Cal/OSHA regulation 8 CCR 3203 (IIPP) [8]

Resources

- UC Davis Office Area Inspection List [9]
- Hazard Alert Form [10]
- Personal and Workplace Safety [12]
- Workplace Safety [13]

Contact

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More information

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