

Safety in the Office Environment

Safety in the office environment is not automatic. It is easy to let your guard down in an air-conditioned, carpeted, and well-lit office. DON'T. While offices are safer than a water treatment plant, there are hazards that need to be addressed by office managers and office workers.

Avoiding slip – trip – fall injuries

S-T-F injuries are the most common and costly injuries to office workers. The Safety Director recommends work places be periodically inspected for hazardous conditions. Pay particular attention to:

- Surfaces of floors – Carpets can fray and lift up. Tiles can get slippery or loosen. Water can accumulate by doors, or in front of kitchen and bathroom sinks. Even the odd piece of paper left on the floor becomes a slip hazard.

Managers should establish a culture where conditions such as spilled water are handled immediately as an act of caring for coworkers and visitors. Provide warning signs and caution tape for when conditions cannot be corrected by office staff and must be reported to facilities. Follow-up on reported deficiencies so that they are not allowed to exist indefinitely.

- Objects on or near the floor – Look for typical objects that present trip hazards, such as electrical cords, open drawers or boxes and purses on the floor. Make it a habit to store these items in a place other than on the floor next to you, or in an aisle. Carrying large items in front of you can obstruct your view of the floor, further increasing the risk. Avoid this behavior and use a cart instead.
- Lighting – Poor lighting is a contributing factor in many slip and trip injuries. Stairwells are especially troublesome areas. It is not uncommon for facilities to reduce electrical bills by turning off some light fixtures in stairwells. The national standard for illumination in offices varies from 250 to 500 lumens, depending on the task. There are smartphone apps that can measure light levels to guide managers when additional lighting is needed.



Standing on chairs is a dangerous act. Get a ladder or step stool

Musculoskeletal injuries from lifting & carrying

Strains and sprains to shoulders, knees and backs are also among the most common injuries to office workers. The Safety Director recommends these best practices to protect workers when lifting and carrying objects:

- Managers have an obligation to discuss with workers their expectation of how much should be lifted and carried by office staff. Consider the weight, size and shape of the object, the height of the lift and the level the object will be placed down on. Use common lifts such as a box of computer paper, desktop printers, water jugs, etc. as examples of what should be attempted by office workers and when help should be requested. Make it clear that you WANT staff to ask for help with heavy or awkward objects, and EXPECT coworkers to help each others.

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- Mechanical aids to assist with lifting and carrying must be readily available. Hand trucks, carts, or even a chair with wheels can reduce the strain of carrying heavy objects. Or, make multiple trips. The closer the device is to the area, the more likely it will be used. Many injuries occur when a hand truck was present, but on the other side of the building or another floor. The answer is having multiple devices.
- Store heavier items on shelves that are at waist-height. Store lighter objects on the floor and top shelves. When accessing items from shelves that are over shoulder-height, use a rolling set of stairs instead of a ladder. Proper use of a ladder requires three-points-of-contact. Using two hands to lift an object from a shelf while standing on a ladder will always violate this basic safety rule.

Setting up your work station

Proper body mechanics can help improve productivity and reduce discomfort. The ideal desk / chair set-up replicates your neutral body posture. OSHA's Computer Station eTool gives the following guidelines to initially adjust your chair:

- *Hands, wrists, and forearms* are straight, in-line and roughly parallel to the floor.
- *Head* is level or bent slightly forward, facing forward, and balanced; generally in-line with the *torso*.
- *Shoulders* are relaxed and *upper arms* hang normally at the side of the body.
- *Elbows* stay in close to the body and are bent between 90° and 120°.
- *Feet* are fully supported by the floor or a footrest may be used if the desk height is not adjustable.
- *Back* is fully supported with appropriate lumbar support when sitting vertical or leaning back slightly.
- *Thighs and hips* are supported by a well-padded seat and generally parallel to the floor.
- *Knees* are about the same height as the hips with the *feet* slightly forward.

Once you have adjusted your chair to these generic guidelines, you may have to fine tune the adjustments to better suit YOUR neutral or relaxed posture. Consider these tips for setting up the top of your desk:

- *Monitors* are between 20 and 28 inches away, and the top of the screen is at or just below eye level. Place monitors perpendicular to windows to reduce glare.
- *Keyboards* should be directly in front of you and at a height where your shoulders are relaxed and your elbows are close to your body. Your wrists ought to be straight and in-line with your forearms. Padded supports can help achieve this alignment and to avoid resting hands or forearms on the edges of a desk.
- *Mouse / pointers* are positioned close to keyboard. Keyboard shortcuts can reduce the strain of reaching for pointers. Trackballs, touch pads, and finger tip joysticks offer opportunities to further reduce stresses of reaching and moving a traditional mouse.
- *Telephones* also need to be kept close to you to minimize reaching for the handset. If work requires significant time on the phone, or entering data onto a computer while on the phone, a headset or speaker will reduce shoulder and neck strain.

OSHA (www.osha.gov) and N.J. PEOSH / DOH (<http://www.state.nj.us/health/peosh/peoshvdt.shtml>) offer additional guidance. Even with perfectly adjusted and laid-out chairs and desks, workers are encouraged to periodically move from their desks for several seconds and stretch those static muscles.

Safety in an office setting is not automatic. It takes a commitment on the part of office managers, office workers, and facilities to create a place that is free of recognizable hazards to workers and visitors. Office managers are encouraged to do three things:

1. Talk to staff frequently about your expectations of creating a safe workplace and hold them accountable.
2. Conduct Job Site Observations. Office tasks can be made safer if we look for better alternatives.
3. Inspect your areas for undesirable conditions. Fix or report them and document your efforts.