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OFFICE HAZARDS

by Theona Layne

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Often the biggest health concerns most office workers face are packing a healthy lunch, getting enough exercise to combat a sedentary lifestyle, or finding effective ways to reduce stress. But what many professionals don't realize is that the office environment can be quite dangerous.

- Adjusting monitors to eye level so the neck is in a neutral position
- Adjusting office chairs to support the back
- Reducing the use of fluorescent lighting, which can be hard on the eyes

“People think they can't get hurt as easily in an office, but that's untrue,” says David Quezada, vice president, loss control of EMPLOYERS, a Reno, Nevada-based specialty workers' compensation insurance carrier. “In fact the frequencies of injuries tend to be higher in an office setting.”

Slips, trips, and falls: The dangerous trio

Quezada has a point. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, companies reported three million non-fatal injuries just last year alone. The most common causes of these injuries are slips, trips, and falls, which cost office workers physical and emotional suffering and thousands of dollars in lost wages.

Office workers are 2.5 times more likely to suffer injuries from this dangerous trio than those in other industries. Here are a few reasons for this startling statistic:

- Open desk drawers
- Loose carpeting
- Cluttered walkways
- Exposed wiring and cables
- Spilled liquid on break room floors
- Wet floors with no “Wet Floor” signs to warn of a potential fall hazard

According to Eric Gislason,

executive director of the National Association of Safety Professionals, another cause of slips, trips, and fall injuries is office workers taking shortcuts. An example is using a wheeled chair for a purpose intended for a stepladder—changing a light bulb or reaching the top shelf of a supply cabinet.

Poor ergonomics is a real pain

Poor ergonomics can lead to another common office-related injury, and in many cases it can be a much more costly injury than slips, trips, and falls, Quezada says. Carpal tunnel syndrome alone costs employees upwards of \$30,000 in surgery and doctor's appointments. Additionally, some estimates project lost productivity due to Carpal tunnel and similar injuries costs U.S. employers \$225.8 billion, or \$1,685 per employee.

Proper ergonomics involves setting up a worksite that allows employees to do their jobs safely and efficiently while reducing the chances of musculoskeletal problems such as back, neck, shoulder, and Carpal tunnel pain. Ultimately, poor ergonomics leads to fatigued and unproductive employees.

Companies can help create a safe environment by making sure workers follow simple office ergonomic practices like:

Another way companies can help correct poor ergonomics is to offer alternative seating options such as standing desks, treadmill desks, or balance balls. According to a survey conducted by EMPLOYERS, 77 percent of small businesses reported that they don't offer these seating options.

Studies show that sitting for extended periods contributes to health problems such as cancer, poor digestion and of course, back problems. Seating options such as standing desks create more body movement that's often lacking in today's office environment.

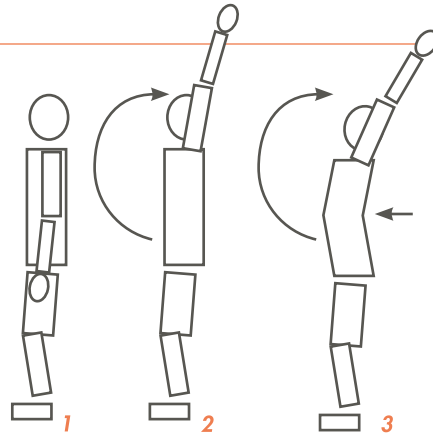
Take a break and stretch

Experts recommend taking a short break, looking away from the monitor, and stretching every 15 minutes or so. According to Gislason, there's a 50 percent decreased risk of ergonomic injury with a regular schedule of basic stretching exercises.

“We spend so many hours of the day hunched forward that we're all losing our natural alignment and posture,” says Todd Sinett, chiropractor and author of the book “Three Weeks to a Better Back.” Dr. Sinett recommends the stretches on page 10 to counteract the effects of sitting behind a desk all day.

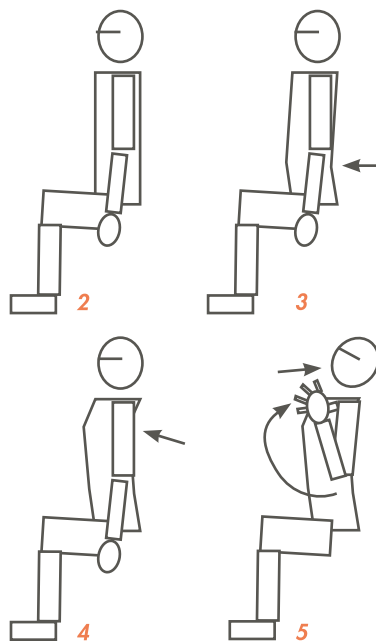
Standing abdominal stretch

1. Stand with feet about hip width apart and knees slightly bent.
2. Extend arms straight overhead.
3. Do a slight back bend, stretching the abs.
4. Repeat this stretch 12 times.



Thumbs to pit stretch

1. Sit at the edge of a chair.
2. Place feet directly below the knees, separating them slightly and turning them slightly outward.
3. Lightly arch the lower back by rolling the pelvis slightly forward.
4. Ease the chest forward and slightly upward.
5. Rotate arms upward until palms are facing forward, separate fingers, point thumbs backward and tuck them under the armpits, and slightly draw the chin inward.
6. Hold this position and take a deep breath.
7. Repeat several times per hour.



Safety committees make offices safer

Both Gislason and Quezada recommend companies form safety committees. Safety committees would consist of three to five members who would regularly meet to identify, assess, and address safety concerns including ergonomic issues. Permanent members of the committee would be Human Resources

office welfare, safety committees could help reduce workers' compensation insurance rates. To receive rate reductions, companies must show a commitment to proactive security measures, Gislason says. Companies should keep detailed records of the following:

- Regular safety inspections
- Job Safety Analysis (JSA)
- Regular safety training
- Investigating office accidents and forming a plan to correct any issues

Quezada adds that some states offer credits or discounts to help lower workers' compensation policy rates if a company has other safety programs in place like Drug-Free Workplace and Return-to-Work, which allows injured workers to perform limited or light duty work.

For businesses to receive premium discounts, the safety committee members must go through annual training. Then, the company must file for workplace safety certification. Quezada advises companies contact the Workers' Compensation Bureau or Department of Insurance for information on available credits or discounts.

Employees and businesses must take a vigilant role in creating and maintaining a culture of office safety. Yes, it may take some effort to get things in place, but a healthier, happier, and safer workplace is well worth the effort.

personnel and a committee president. Less permanent members may serve for a year at a time.

Safety committee members should receive training in office safety practices. Organizations like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the National Safety Council and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) offer workplace safety training.

In addition to enhancing

About the author:

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