



# PREVENTION OF OFFICE HAZARDS



Office work may be hazardous to your health. Falls are the most common office accident, accounting for the greatest number of disabling injuries. Sprains and strains, lifting hazards, poor workstation ergonomics, indoor environmental quality problems, poor lighting, noise, electrical hazards, violence, and emergency preparedness deficiencies are all issues that should be evaluated and addressed in the office setting. Your PEF Health and Safety Committee, PEF Field Representative, and PEF Health and Safety can assist you in identifying the dangers and correcting the problems to help ensure a safer work environment.

This factsheet covers the broad range of hazards in an office.

## 1. Slips, Trips and Falls

A fall occurs when you lose your balance and footing. Common causes of office falls are tripping over an open desk or file drawer, bending while seated in an unstable chair, tripping over loose electrical cords, or slipping on wet or icy hallways, parking lots, or walkways. Loose carpeting, objects stored in halls or walkways, and inadequate lighting also invite falls. Using a chair or stack of boxes in place of a ladder also causes falls. Trip hazards may also impede egress in the event of an emergency.



**Prevention** : Be sure the pathway is clear before you walk. Close drawers after every use. Avoid excessive bending, twisting, and leaning while seated. Secure electrical cords and wires away from walkways. Always use a ladder for overhead access. Chairs should never be used in place of stepladders. Clean up spills immediately and keep floors dry. Report loose carpeting and damaged floors. Wear stable shoes with non-slip soles. Never carry anything that obscures your vision. If you do begin to fall, try not to reach out- reaching out an arm or leg to break a fall may result in a broken arm or leg.

## 2. Strains and Back Injuries

Typical office loads such as stacks of files, computers, or boxes of paper can cause serious injuries. Backs are extremely vulnerable, and most back injuries involve lifting. Do not move desks, bookcases, and other furniture without assistance or proper equipment.

**Prevention** : Get assistance with a heavy load. Do not lift anything above shoulder height. Do not try to impress anyone with lifting. Take a balanced stance, with feet shoulder width apart. Squat down rather than bending to lift from the floor. Keep the back as straight as possible. Grip the object firmly and keep the load close to



your body, with your elbows held close to the trunk. Do not jerk the load. Use the legs as much as possible. Never twist when lifting. Do not lift from a seated position. Use smooth, careful motions when lifting and lowering objects. Use lifting aids such as carts and hand trucks as much as possible. Minimize lifting from the floor, store materials at knee height or higher on shelving, pallets, boxes, etc. Evaluate job design for excessive or repetitive lifting.

### 3. Striking or Bumping against Objects

Injuries occur when people bump or are hit by doors, desks, filing cabinets, or other objects.

**Prevention** : Pay attention when walking at all times. Properly store materials. Do not open more than one drawer at a time in filing cabinets. Be cautious when approaching a door that could open and strike you.

### 4. Pinching, Squeezing, or Crushing Incidents

Fingers can get caught in files, drawers, windows, and office equipment. Paper cutters and other equipment used in offices can be very hazardous.

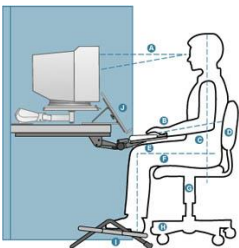
**Prevention** : Concentrate on the task when using office equipment. Ensure that files are stored properly and adequate space is available so files are not packed too tightly. Have defective equipment such as windows repaired.

### 5. Materials Storage

Improperly stored materials can lead to objects falling on workers, poor visibility, fire hazards, and trip hazards. Good housekeeping programs should reduce or eliminate improper storage of materials.

**Prevention** : Do not stack boxes on file cabinets. Store heavy objects lower. Use only designated storage areas. Passageways, exits, fire alarms and equipment, sprinkler heads, electrical panels and controls must remain unobstructed at all times. Fire sprinklers must have 18 inches of clear space around them.

### 6. Workstation Ergonomics



Poor computer and workstation ergonomics can negatively impact worker safety and health. Most problems relate to the eyes, hands, arms, neck, and back. Design of the workstation, the nature and repetitiveness of the task, stress, pace, work rest schedules, posture, and personal factors in workers all influence comfort and safety at computer workstations.

**Prevention** : Position the chair, keyboard and mouse in a straight line with the body. Maintain the body in a relaxed, neutral posture. Sit up straight, adjusting the chair to provide firm back support. Let the arms hang loosely at the shoulders. Keep the arms parallel to the floor, with the wrists straight while typing. Maintain a 90 degree or more bend at the elbows. Use an adjustable keyboard tray to position the keyboard and mouse at a comfortable height, usually lower than the desk surface. The mouse should be positioned next to the keyboard. Keep the mouse as close to the body as

possible to avoid reaching. Adjust chair height to position thighs parallel to the floor while giving good foot support. Ensure the chair is properly sized to prevent the seat pan of the chair from pushing into the back of the knee. Adjust the monitor so that the top of the screen is slightly below eye level. The monitor should be at a comfortable distance from the eyes, typically 16 - 28 inches straight ahead. Minimize direct overhead lighting. Avoid glare from windows by using blinds or curtains. Do not cradle the telephone when keying, use a hands free headset if needed. Keep frequently used items at easy reach. Change postures frequently and take micro-breaks every 20-30 minutes. Advocate for your agency to develop a written ergonomics policy. *Request a copy of PEF's Office Ergonomics Factsheet for additional information, or call H&S to schedule training for your agency.*

## 7. Indoor Air Quality

Indoor air and environmental quality are complex problems that can lead to discomfort and a variety of health symptoms. Many factors may contribute to the problems. These include chemical contaminants, poor ventilation, and insufficient maintenance of the ventilation system, inadequate temperature control, microbiological contaminants, water damage, stressful psychological conditions, and many others.

**Prevention** : Maintain a supply of 20 cubic feet per minute (20 cfm) of outside, filtered air per person in an office environment. Respond immediately to any water intrusion, repair leaks, remediate damage, and dry the area. Maintain good housekeeping and make sure cleaning solvents are used according to the manufacturer's recommendations; environmentally safe (green) products should be used. Inspect and clean ventilation components regularly. Ensure filters are changed regularly. Maintain winter temperatures between 68 and 74 degrees F., summer between 73 and 79 degrees F. Exhaust large copiers and other equipment generating contaminants directly to the outdoors. Involve your health and safety committee in indoor environmental quality management and oversight. Encourage employees suffering symptoms to see medical providers for diagnosis and treatment. Monitor pesticide use, construction, and renovation activities. *Request a copy of PEF's Indoor Environmental Quality Factsheet and Resolving Indoor Temperature Control factsheet for additional information.*

## 8. Lighting

Lighting is a significant factor affecting comfort on the job. Light levels should be geared to the task, without excessive glare (brightness). More detailed work requires higher levels of lighting. Work on computer monitors does not require high lighting levels. Vision problems can lead to headaches and many other symptoms. Poor lighting may also increase accidents.



**Prevention** : Use matte finishes to reduce glare. Use curtains or blinds on windows to prevent glare, and diffusers, location, or other means to control overhead lighting. Task lamps on desks allow more lighting control for individuals.

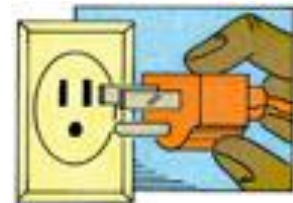
## 9. Noise

Noise is unwanted sound. Noise can produce tension and stress, distraction, and can interfere with communication. At high levels, it can damage hearing. Noise can be detrimental to performance and safety in offices. OSHA/PESH noise standards are rarely approached or exceeded in offices, except in areas where large printers, copiers, or other high-speed office equipment is used.

**Prevention** : Select the quietest equipment available. Maintain equipment properly. Locate noisier equipment away from personnel. Use barriers or dividers to isolate noise sources. Schedule noisy tasks at times when they will have less impact.

## 10. Electrical Hazards

Electrical equipment is essential to the modern office, but electricity is hazardous and can cause serious shock and burn injuries if improperly used or maintained. If part of the body comes in contact with an electrical current, a shock will occur. Electrical accidents usually occur as a result of faulty or defective equipment, unsafe installation, or misuse of equipment. Grounding electrical equipment is a method of protecting from shock.



**Prevention** : Maintain grounding and ground fault circuit interrupters where needed. Never remove grounding plugs. Do not overload outlets. Be aware of current demands. Minimize the use of extension cords, which can be a fire, electrical, and tripping hazard. These should be used only as a temporary power supply. Do not use power strips in multiple combinations, i.e. plugging one power strip into another or an extension cord. Inspect cords regularly for fraying, cuts, or breakage. Do not attach cords to walls, pipes, or windows. Do not twist cords or push tightly against outlets. Do not bring small appliances from home for use in the office. Avoid running cords across hallways and walkways. Ensure faceplates are mounted on all switches and outlets. Do not pull plugs out of outlets by yanking on the cord. Never work on live electrical equipment, disconnect before cleaning, adjusting, or maintaining. Replace all guards and insulation. Do not block electrical equipment.

## 11. Violence

Violence is a potential hazard in all workplaces, and an everyday hazard in some occupations. The source of violence can be strangers, clients, significant others of co-workers, or co-workers themselves. Threats or other precursors to violence must be reported and addressed. Physical security of the office should be evaluated, with reasonable precautions taken, such as lighted parking areas, secured entrances, and other measures as appropriate. Preplanning for violence prevention and training should take place.



**Prevention** : Per the 12 NYCRR Part 800.6 and Labor Law §27-b public employers are required to design and implement workplace violence protection programs, with the participation of the employee representatives, to prevent and minimize the hazard of workplace violence to public employees. Careful review, training, and planning for violence prevention activities should take place in all work locations. Employees should be involved in planning physical security, means for reporting incidents, threats, and concerns and follow-up when incidents occur. A written

plan should be developed that includes methods for assessing hazards; plans for controlling hazards and preventing violence; strategies to respond when violence occurs; union involvement in developing and implementing the program; and management's commitment to fully and effectively implement the program. *Request a copy of PEF's Workplace Violence Prevention Factsheet for additional information, or call PEF H&S to schedule risk assessment training for your agency.*

## 12. Emergency Preparedness

Fires, hazardous materials incidents, medical emergencies, weather emergencies such as tornadoes and floods, and other emergencies can all impact the workplace with little warning. Preparations for prompt evacuation and response to emergencies can make a huge difference in saving lives. A locally developed emergency action plan should address potential emergencies that could be expected. All workers should understand what actions to take during an evacuation and where to assemble in a safe zone. New employees should be trained in the plan as rapidly as possible.



**Prevention:** Review your agency's written emergency action plan.

Individuals responsible for aspects of the plan (chain of command) must be identified and given authority for making decisions in an emergency. The NYS Office of General Services recommends the formation of a Tenant Safety Organization to assume these duties. Communication methods for alerting workers to an evacuation or other emergency must be developed. Duties such as shutting down equipment, searching for individuals, and other steps to be taken should be outlined. Evacuation routes must be selected, and evacuations tested in a realistic manner. Be sure to know the location of more than one emergency exit and that nothing is blocking your exit route. Do not prop open fire-rated corridor doors. They resist flames and keep smoke out of corridors only if closed. Be aware of the closest fire alarm and know how to alert the emergency response system. Participate in emergency drills and ensure that they are held periodically.

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*Upon request, PEF Occupational Safety & Health will provide other factsheets, standards, regulations, and other resources. Contact us at [healthandsafety@pef.org](mailto:healthandsafety@pef.org) or 518-785-1900, ext. 254 or 1-800-342-4306, ext. 254.*

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