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**National Institutes of Health
Office of Research Services
Division of Occupational
Health and Safety**

Providing a safe and healthy environment for employees, patients and visitors.

“Safe science and good science go hand-in-hand.”

The articles in this Newsletter are intended to provide general summary information to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) community. They are not intended to take the place of either the written law or regulations. It is not NIH's intention to provide specific advice to readers of this Newsletter, but rather general information to help better understand how to prevent or reduce workplace injuries and illnesses.

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Office hazards

No workplace is ever completely free of hazards, and an office is no exception. The hazards may not be as obvious as they are on a shop floor, but people can suffer serious injuries in an office environment. Fires, bloodborne pathogens, improper housekeeping, electrical equipment, chemicals, and even materials that need to be lifted by hand can all cause injury.



Every office employee has safety responsibilities and some workers are assigned extra duties during emergency situations.

Preparing for emergencies

Being ready to handle an emergency will help keep you safe in certain situations. Employers will often implement an office safety program. When there's a fire, severe weather, or some other emergency, you can rely on the written emergency action plan (EAP) to give you the instructions you need to stay safe.

Everyone in the office should know:

- How to report fires, injuries, chemical spills, and other emergencies;
- How to recognize alarms and other warning signals;
- What evacuation route you should follow;
- Where to assemble after an evacuation;
- Where to take shelter from a storm; and

- Who to ask for more information.

Fire extinguishers

If everyone is to follow an EAP to evacuate in case of a fire, there's no need for anyone to learn how to use fire extinguishers. Just because there's a fire extinguisher in the office doesn't mean you're supposed to use it.

However, some employees will be designated to use fire extinguishers, and these employees will be provided with hands-on training in the use of the equipment. Even trained employees have to take precautions. Never try to fight a fire if:

- A fire extinguisher isn't readily accessible;
- You aren't sure if the extinguisher is the right type for the fire;
- You aren't sure how to use the extinguisher;
- The fire is already smoky, hot, or is spreading rapidly; or
- Your escape path is threatened or blocked.

Reporting and treating injuries

Office workers may not have the same risk for serious injuries as do factory workers, but injuries can still occur. Report any injury right away, and no injury is too minor to report.

When there's no nearby hospital, clinic, or infirmary that can be used to treat

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injured employees, employers must have trained persons to render first aid.

In many offices, however, the policy is to call for emergency responders (such as paramedics or emergency medical technicians) or to go to a nearby clinic in case of an injury.

Bloodborne pathogens

There's often blood involved with an injury. Blood can carry infectious microbes such as the hepatitis B virus (HBV) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). OSHA's bloodborne pathogens standard applies to all "occupational exposures" to blood or other potentially infectious materials. Employees who are designated by the employer to provide first aid (or to clean up equipment and surfaces contaminated with blood) are covered by the standard.

These employees use "universal precautions." This is an approach to infection control where all human blood and certain body fluids are treated as if they were known to be infectious for bloodborne pathogens. Wearing rubber gloves and protective clothing is part of following universal precautions, so don't feel offended if first aid providers wear protective gear when they help you.

Slips, trips and falls

Slips, trips, and falls are some of the most common causes of serious injuries in the office. To avoid injuries:

- Keep floors dry;
- Wear shoes with non-slip soles, walk carefully, and don't run if you're in a hurry;
- Always watch where you're going and never carry materials that you can't see over;
- Keep aisles, stairs, and work areas clean and free of clutter;
- Keep file cabinet drawers closed;
- Keep clear access to aisles and exits;
- Report loose or damaged stair treads, handrails, or carpeting; and
- Always use a proper stepladder to reach materials on high shelves.

Safe lifting

Office workers aren't immune from having to do manual lifting, occasionally. Improper lifting is a common cause of injury. Try to use a cart or dolly to move items when you can. Get help to move heavy materials. When you need to manually lift materials:

- Plan the lift by testing the object's weight and having a clear path and place to set the object down;
- Position yourself squarely in front of the object;
- Bend your knees and keep your back straight;

- Get a full, firm grip with the object held close to your body;
- Straighten your knees to lift the object and keep your back straight;
- Don't twist your back as you carry the object; and
- Set down the load by bending your knees to lower it into position.

Electrical safety

In an office, properly installed electrical equipment is guarded, or covered and insulated. Misuse and defective equipment can cause shocks and burns. To avoid electrical hazards:

- Visually inspect portable electrical equipment before use for defects such as loose parts, damaged or missing prongs on the plug, damaged insulation around the cord, and exposed bare wires;
- Never handle cords, plugs, or equipment with wet hands;
- Keep cords clean and free from kinks;
- Don't raise or lower equipment by its cord or pull on the cord to unplug it;
- Don't use staples to secure cords in place as this can damage the cord's outer insulation; and
- Don't use circuit breakers, fuses, or safety switches to repeatedly energize equipment — use the equipment's control switches that are designed for regular use.



Chemical hazards

There may be chemical hazards in an office. Cleaning products, inks, adhesives, etc. may be flammable or reactive. Using the chemicals may lead to unhealthy exposures. OSHA's hazard communication standard has requirements for container labels and safety data sheets (SDSs).

In an office, however, you may only be exposed to chemicals when you use various types of consumer products such as correction fluid or a cleaner for a dry erase board. OSHA's standard doesn't apply if you're using a consumer product as it's intended to be used by a consumer.

Reporting hazards

Hazards can only be addressed if they're identified. If you notice a hazardous situation, report it right away. Be especially vigilant for hazards when you change equipment, materials, or procedures — changes can introduce hazards.

Safety focus: Are you practicing unsafe behaviors?

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) implements and enforces standards to keep workers safe in the workplace. As an employee, you should be aware of the numerous safety programs and procedures in place at your company. With safety laws, safety training, and company policies in place to keep us all safe, why do workplace injuries still occur?

The causes behind unsafe behaviors

One reason injuries still occur may involve workers' behaviors and the factors that influence those behaviors. An individual might bypass the safe way to complete a task in order to save time or get the job done faster.

Throughout their lives, workers pick-up many potential behaviors...some good, some bad; some safe, some unsafe. They generally choose those behaviors that will keep them safe. However, there are factors that can lead them to choose the unsafe behavior while on the job:

- **Apathy** — Sometimes workers just don't care about working safely.
- **Unsure** — Workers may be reluctant to ask for clarification and start tasks with unclear directions.
- **Uncomfortable** — A job may be physically uncomfortable, so a worker is prone to rushing to get the job done or bypasses safe procedures.
- **Hurrying** — Although working quickly can sometimes be positive, if speed jeopardizes safety then it's dangerous.
- **Dislike for authority** — Some workers just dislike authority. It may influence their decision to work safely, either by failing to follow procedures or working angrily.
- **Overconfidence** — Being too sure of oneself during the performance of a task can make a worker think that an accident won't happen.
- **Horseplay** — Most horseplay consists of unsafe behavior when done in the workplace. Workers can get so caught up in the moment that they fail to recognize the potential hazards of their actions.
- **Outside distractions** — Thinking of personal tasks, problems, or upcoming events can cause loss of focus on the task at hand.



- **We've always done it this way** — Sometimes it is hard to change the way a task is performed to a newer, safer method because the task steps are so ingrained.

If you witness co-workers engaging in unsafe behaviors, it could be because they have never had negative consequences from those actions. We never think a car accident is going to happen to us and usually that is true. We exceed the speed limit or use a phone while driving because we haven't experienced a negative consequence. The same can happen in the workplace. People have learned that the risks they might take are worth it because they don't expect to be injured.

Correcting behaviors

Many behavioral factors can be corrected or controlled if workers are taught to recognize them. But changing ingrained behaviors is no easy task. How can you take steps towards practicing safe behaviors?

- **Take the time to do it right.** Follow the correct steps when performing tasks. Don't take shortcuts even if it saves time. After a while, doing things correctly will become habit.
- **Wear the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).** PPE is intended to protect you and prevent injury. Know how to use and care for it correctly.
- **Ask questions if you don't understand.** If you aren't sure why a certain task is done the way it is, ask.
- **Take safety seriously.** Horseplay may be fun, but unsafe behavior can lead to injury. Play it safe.
- **Adapt.** Times change, methods change, improvements to processes are made — learn the new processes and implement them into your routine.
- **Be proactive.** Practice safety and encourage safe behaviors in others.

You can take the first step toward practicing safe behavior. Your example may serve to inspire your co-workers to do the same.



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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide a forum for the dissemination of health and safety information. It is intended to enhance communication to National Institutes of Health (NIH) employees, raise awareness of current safety policies and procedures, and provide guidance on relevant issues. It is provided as a service by the NIH, Office of Research Services, Division of Occupational Health and Safety.

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Move to improve your health

"Exercise is labor without weariness."

Samuel Johnson

Getting enough exercise can be a challenge, especially if your job doesn't require you to leave the comfort of your desk chair.

It's important to make movement a priority, however. Physical activity lowers your risk for diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and some cancers. In addition, it decreases your chances of becoming depressed and helps you sleep well at night.

To make exercise something you look forward to, put the ideas below into action. If you're just starting to exercise, begin slowly and consult your doctor if you have any medical concerns.

Make it easy. Walk around your neighborhood. Join a gym that's close to home, or buy a few weights, an exercise ball, or treadmill to use at home.

Think back. Revive activities you enjoyed doing as a child, such as biking, tennis, or swimming.

Enjoy a group activity. Go for a jog with a friend, or go to a yoga class with a coworker. Rather than going out to eat with friends, go for a hike at a local park or walk through a botanical garden.

Try something new. Take a dance class, or learn how to golf or surf.

Be active at work

A recent CareerBuilder survey found that 56 percent of workers in the United States

believe they're overweight, and 45 percent say they've put on pounds at their present job.

Sedentary jobs, fatigue caused by work, and a lack of time for exercise were some of the activity barriers that workers said contributed to weight gain. To overcome those exercise obstacles, make working out a priority and blend movement into your day:

- Ride your bike to work, or get off the bus or subway a stop early and walk the rest of the way. If you drive, park in the last row.
- Take the stairs whenever possible, and stand during phone calls.
- Take a 10-minute walk before work, at lunchtime, and after work.
- Exercise before work, or treat an exercise class like an appointment or meeting you can't miss.



Physical activity lowers your risk for diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and some cancers.

