Workplace Health and Safety – Lower the Risks in Any Environment

For many, office work is not viewed as “high risk”, but the truth is that a typical office work environment has its hazards. Consider these helpful tips:

Go ergo. Slouched over your desk, squinting to see your dark screen? Many office workers do not practice good desk-side posture habits. The consequences of this can be backaches, neck stiffness, and even repetitive strain injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome. Going ergo doesn’t necessarily mean investing in fancy equipment. Try:

- Centering the keyboard and mouse and positioning them close to you so the upper part of your arms hang relaxed
- Positioning your monitor so your gaze falls about a third of the way down from the top of the screen
- Adjusting your chair height (or keyboard platform) so your shoulders are not strained and your elbows are at 90 degrees
- Angling your keyboard platform, if possible, so that it tilts down slightly
- Using a mouse pad with a wrist rest and a keyboard wrist rest to help avoid strain

Reduce eyestrain by adjusting the brightness of your monitor so that it is comfortable. If you find yourself constantly squinting to read the screen, use a program to increase the font size of the text. Give your eyes a break every few minutes by taking them off the screen and focusing on a far-away object.

Pay attention to your surroundings. Employees are increasingly “plugged in” to mobile devices and “disconnecting” from the outside world; talking while driving, emailing while walking or some other combination of! This can result in falls, walking into traffic and car accidents. If your smart phone urgently buzzes while you’re out and about, stop (or pull over), respond and then continue on your way.

Keep it clean. Sharing office space, equipment and supplies with co-workers means viruses and bacteria are ever-present. Keep your hands clean by washing frequently with soap and water—especially after using the washroom, sneezing or coming into contact with someone who is ill. Hand sanitizer will do in a pinch. If you usually eat at your desk you’ll want to wipe it down frequently, especially when you find out that a typical desk carries 400 times more bacteria than the average toilet.

Take a break. Reduce muscle strain and repetitive injuries by changing positions, taking a moment to stretch or go for a quick walk, which can boost circulation and prevent muscle stiffness.

Remove tripping hazards. Prevent slips, trips and falls by taping down cords, keeping boxes and bags out of the way and ensuring your cubicle or office space is clear of clutter.

The physical demands of fieldwork and that within the manufacturing environment can undoubtedly take its toll. Prevent muscle strain, injury and accidents by following these tried tips:

Report hazards. If you constantly see near misses caused by equipment, people skipping steps or other obvious hazards (e.g. slippery floors, exposed cords or poor lighting) don’t wait for an accident to happen. Instead, report the problem to your manager or supervisor right away so the issue can be fixed.

Lift wisely. They don’t call it “backbreaking work” for nothing: about 75 percent of Canadians whose jobs involve lifting report back pain. If you do a lot of heavy lifting, remember and practice this:

- Stretch before moving anything
- Test the load by pushing it to get a sense of how heavy it is

- Ensure the pathway you need to move it along is clear and plan your move in advance
- Face the direction you'll need to move the object
- Use your arms and legs when lifting, keep your back straight and the item close to your body, between knee and shoulder height
- Get help or break the load down into smaller, lighter loads if possible
- Prevent falls by following workplace rules, wearing appropriate footwear, and watching out for hazards, such as wet floors, clutter or uneven surfaces. Take your time and use the proper equipment for jobs performed at larger heights (e.g. the right ladder, harness equipment or secure scaffolding).

Stay hydrated. Drink plenty of water if you're working outdoors in the summer months or are in a workspace with no air conditioning.

Keep your body "neutral." Avoid bending, stretching, stooping or reaching behind you while you work. If you're in a job where you move repetitively, step away from the work for a few seconds whenever you can. If this isn't possible, try shifting your position in place and ensuring you stretch out before and after breaks.

Wear required protective equipment. Whether it's steel-toed boots, a hard hat, gloves, goggles or earplugs, your employer provides equipment for a good reason. Specialized gear can prevent accidents or longer-term conditions such as hearing loss from noisy equipment. It might take a little time to get used to but is it really worth the risk to go without?

Workplace Safety in Numbers

- In 2009, one in every 65 working Canadians was injured or harmed on the job and received workers compensation as a result
- In 2000-2001, about 10 per cent of Canadian adults suffered from a repetitive strain injury (RSI) that limited their daily activities
- Approximately 60,000 workers annually are injured in fall accidents. This accounts for about fifteen percent of the "time-loss injuries" across Canada accepted by Workers' Compensation Boards
- Construction, fishing and manufacturing, transportation, storage and communications were the most accident-prone industries in 2009
- There were 1,014 workplace deaths in Canada in 2010 compared to 939 in 2009