

Women's Health and Safety

Many work related activities can affect women's health. Below are some of the most common problems with suggestions on how you can minimize the risks.

Back pain

At least 100,000 women a year suffer with back problems because of work and 1 in 6 working days lost in the UK is due to back pain.

Lifting and moving

More than a quarter of women lift or move heavy loads at work. In many jobs this involves lifting or moving people. Under the Manual Handling Regulations 1992, any manual handling tasks you may be expected to do should have been assessed. Following the suggestions below will help to prevent injuries and back pain:

- ▲ Check the weight of the object, and whether the weight is evenly distributed.
- ▲ Ensure the route you will take is clear.
- ▲ Get help if needed, either another person or mechanical equipment
- ▲ Have a firm grip and use gloves only if necessary.
- ▲ Lift with your leg muscles
- ▲ Keep the load close to your body
- ▲ Move your feet rather than twisting your spine
- ▲ Try to avoid lifting above your head or below your knees

Other causes

Back pain can also be caused by long drives without breaks; sitting in low, soft chairs; spending long periods in one position.

Coping with back pain

Keep as active as possible. Speak to your doctor before beginning an exercise program. You may also consider consulting a chiropractor, osteopath or physiotherapist.

Display screen workstations

You can suffer from work-related headaches and eye strain. It is a requirement that all workstations have risk assessments. Help prevent stiffness, aching and more serious conditions such as repetitive strain injury (RSI) by following these basic tips:

- ▲ Change position frequently and stretch regularly
- ▲ Take regular breaks away from your workstation
- ▲ Use a footrest if your feet don't rest flat on the floor. Failing to do this can cause pressure on the backs of your thighs or knees, compressing nerves and blood vessels.
- ▲ If your chair is uncomfortable, ask for a replacement
- ▲ Ideally, when typing your wrists should be loose and flexible above the keyboard. Try using a wrist rest if you find this uncomfortable.

Eye strain

A common problem in people doing prolonged, visual work, including using microscopes and some photographic jobs. Poor lighting, blurred screen images and reflections can make this worse. Eyes become drier and are more susceptible to conjunctivitis. As your eyes become tired, you will find that you screw up facial muscles, which can cause headaches.

To keep your eyes bright and shiny, look away and re-focus for one-two minutes in every 20. Don't sit too close to the screen.

Under the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992, if you need to wear spectacles for looking at a display screen, your employer must pay for regular eye and eyesight tests and contribute towards the cost of spectacles. You should have your eyes tested every two years.

Laptops

Because laptop screens and keyboards are smaller and are designed to use outside the office environment, it can be harder to maintain comfortable and healthy working postures. Follow the guidelines for standard workstations, but take note of the following as well:

- ▲ Avoid slouching or sitting hunched forward
- ▲ Push the laptop back slightly so that your arms rest on the table and wrists are relaxed
- ▲ Use a chair that supports your back. Sit right back with the curve sitting snugly into your lower back, and use a pillow or similar for support if necessary
- ▲ Adjust the screen brightness to suit the environment.

Repetitive strain injury (RSI)

RSI covers a number of injuries affecting the muscles, tendons and nerves primarily of the neck and upper limbs. Symptoms include aches, pain, swelling, numbness, tingling, weakness and cramps. People who work with display screen equipment may develop RSI, but other activities – such as text messaging – can also lead to the condition. It is preventable and treatable, especially if you heed to early warning signs.

Prevention

- ▲ Cut down on repetitive tasks where possible
- ▲ Maintain good posture and fitness
- ▲ Try to avoid relying on your mouse; use keyboard shortcuts instead

Mental health

Stress is the natural physical reaction to dangerous or demanding incidents. Problems arise when the sources of stress are constant and there is no time to rest and wind down between them. For women, stress is a particular problem because they may have several sources of stress; as well as working, they often bear

most of the responsibility for organizing childcare and looking after the home.

Symptoms

Symptoms of stress can include panic attacks, headaches, sleeplessness, tiredness, frequent colds and infections, changes in eating habits and irritability. Untreated, stress can lead to long-term problems such as heart disease and ulcers.

Treatment

Serious stress problems may require medical treatment and counseling but there are things that you can do to help yourself such as having some time to yourself each day. It is important to ensure that your manager realizes you are suffering from a stress-related illness, and it is particularly important to let them know if the stress is work related.

Violence and women

Women are more vulnerable when working alone or outside normal hours. It is important to be aware of things to do to help you to stay safe. However minor an incident may seem, always report it – not doing so could put others at risk.

When out and about, either at work or in your daily life, remember to PLAN:

- ▲ Prepare for the journey and wear sensible clothing
- ▲ Know your route
- ▲ Tell someone where you are going and your expected time of return
- ▲ Carry a personal alarm
- ▲ Decline offers from strangers
- ▲ Keep to familiar territory where possible
- ▲ Try not to use unlit cash machines
- ▲ Keep a hand free
- ▲ Trust no one and do not ignore your instincts

Pregnancy

The best way to ensure you have a safe and healthy pregnancy is to attend all appointments with your midwife, doctor and hospital. This will ensure your baby's progress is closely monitored and the risk of potentially serious conditions such as pre-eclampsia are spotted. You have a legal right to:

- ▲ time off work to attend these appointments and all antenatal classes.
- ▲ be moved to light duties, or paid full pay to stay of work altogether if the work is particularly hazardous during pregnancy.
- ▲ You should not work nights and should be allowed to come in later and avoid peak travel times if, for example you suffer from morning sickness.

Hazardous substances

Harmful chemicals, including household chemicals, may affect fertility and pregnancy, and can lead to miscarriages or premature births, as well as increasing the risk of other diseases such as cancer.

New and expectant mothers –

Please visit this link for advice and information <http://www.hse.gov.uk/mothers/>

Protect your health

You are entitled to time off because of illness. Many conditions are now covered by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), including asthma, diabetes and, in some cases, cancer. This means you have some protection against dismissal because of your health problems.

Stay healthy whatever your age!

If you think your work may be making you ill, talk to your safety rep who can help you discuss any problems with your manager. You may not be the only worker suffering.

You can take care of your body in a number of ways:

▲ Diet

Try to cut down on fats, added sugar and artificial additives.

▲ Keeping fit

Be active for 30 minutes a day, three times a week; brisk walking is a good choice.

▲ Smoking, drugs and alcohol

People use drugs for many reasons and your habit may be the result of an underlying problem such as depression and anxiety. The NHS Smoking Helpline on 0800 022 4332 (<http://smokefree.nhs.uk/>) can give you practical advice on how to stop. Using drugs and alcohol at work can mean you get sacked for gross misconduct. Your union may have negotiated a drugs and alcohol policy which should signpost you to sources of help and avoid disciplinary action being taken against you.

Information for this factsheet came from the Communication Workers Union: <http://www.cwu.org/women-s-health-guide.html>, <http://www.hse.gov.uk/mothers/>

Find out more

Women's Well-being at Work – A negotiators Guide, by Unite, download from: www.unitetheunion.org
Safety, health and equality at work – a practical guide for trade unionists, April 2012, Labour Research Department. Price £7.50 call 02079283649 or go to www.lrdpublications.org.uk/

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