

## The Office

**The Myth:** Office work is often portrayed as *safe work* - it is said that there are no toxic chemicals, no hazardous machinery, and the environment is clean and healthy.

**The Reality:** Workers in offices are exposed to a multitude of hazards. In the 5 year period from 1996/7 to 2000/01 there were 8 work-related deaths in offices. In addition nearly 5000 serious work-related injuries were reported in offices in that period. However this is thought to be an underestimate, as according to the Labour Force Survey nearly a third of all serious injuries in offices are not reported at all.

**Call Centres** Women form a large percentage of the office population including call centres, where there are part time working opportunities. Call centres have been referred to as the "Satanic Mills of the 90's" with bullying supervisors, workers who are constantly monitored, sitting in cramped spaces with high screens around them and who do excessive keyboard work leading to RSI. There are also concerns that the of call centres workers may be damaged through constant use of the telephone.

Many women work with computers but they tend to do the repetitive work, like data entry and word processing, while men get the more skilled jobs, such as design, analysis and installation.

### **Stress is an issue in office work**

The impact of new technology has also added to workers' stress - not only do office workers have to deal with telephone calls, faxes, and letters but also increasing numbers of emails.

See next page for **Hazards of Office Work & Action Checklist**

### **Some Relevant law**

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999  
The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992  
The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992  
The Health and Safety (Display Screen) Regulations 1992

### **Some Further information**

*Office Health and Safety - a guide for union reps* - LRD books, 78 Blackfriars Road, London, SE1 8HF tel: 0207 928 3649  
**HSE** leaflet *Officewise* INDG 173L - free  
**HSE** leaflet *Working with VDUs* INDG 36 – free  
**HSE** booklet *The Law on VDUs – An easy Guide* HS990 £8.50

### **Hazards of Office Work**

- Visual Display Units (VDU) can cause injuries caused by repetitive work, eyestrain, back, shoulder and neckache, and headaches.
- Photocopiers - badly maintained and poorly positioned photocopiers can cause eye irritation, sore throats, headaches, skin problems and reproductive and cancer hazards.
- Noise - background noise from printers, traffic, fax machines and telephones (a particular issue in call centres) can lead to stress, and, in extreme cases hearing damage.
- Ventilation, temperature and humidity - offices with poor environmental controls can develop sick building syndrome which can lead to workers developing colds, flu like symptoms, tiredness, skin problems and headaches.
- Lifting - lifting equipment during office moves or handling bags of cash in finance departments can lead to back injuries.
- Trailing wires, wet or damaged floors can lead to trips, slips, and falls.
- Pressure of work, bullying, new office technology and dealing with the public can all lead to stress
- Electrical equipment such as kettles that is poorly maintained can lead to electric shocks.
- Overcrowding - cramped working conditions can lead to repetitive strain type injuries/aches and pains and stress.
- Exposure to cigarette smoke from fellow workers

### **Action Checklist**

1. Have risk assessments been carried out on VDU workstations?
2. Some workers may be entitled to an eye test if they work on VDUs - has the employer provided free eye tests?
3. Are photocopiers positioned in well-ventilated areas at least 3 metres from people and preferably in a separate room?
4. Have noise levels been reduced?
5. Are the ventilation, temperature and humidity adequate and comfortable? Temperature must be above 16 degrees centigrade.
6. Is there a stress policy and have stress risk assessments been carried out?
7. Are there policies on harassment and bullying?
8. Have manual handling risk assessments been carried out?
9. Is electrical equipment regularly maintained?
10. What measures are taken to prevent trailing wires and to clear up wet floors?
11. Are workers trained in safe lifting?
12. Are workers given information on the hazards of office work and the steps that the employer is taking to reduce the risks of injury and ill health?
13. Are workers adequately trained in the use of computers and other technology?
14. Is there a policy on passive smoking at work? What arrangements are made to ensure that both the office and any recreational areas are arranged to prevent exposure to smoke.

### **Pregnancy hazards**

Lifting, VDUs, photocopiers, passive smoking, prolonged sitting and stress.