

# Office Safety

Generally when you think of safety in the workplace, you think about dangerous jobs, job-related accidents and injuries that are normally associated with an industrial plant, factory or construction site. You know! These are the places you commonly see all those workers wearing hard hats and steel-toed work boots.

Our subject today puts a little twist to the norm. We're going to talk about a different kind of environment – *the office*. It is difficult to think of the office as a front line or danger zone. Surprisingly, there are a number of hazards even in this type of setting. In fact, a lot of the safety principles that apply on the factory floor carry right over into the office area.

As with any type of accident prevention program, office safety first requires that we all recognize the hazards that exist. In fact, OSHA requires the employers to assess the workplace, identifying hazards that may exist. It is the responsibility of the employer to provide a safe work environment. However, this does not exclude the employee from his/her responsibilities. In addition to compliance, we must accept our obligation to family, co-workers, and employer. In doing so, we will recognize the necessity to help maintain a healthy and safe work environment.

Electrical hazards are often easy to spot, provided you are alert. Perhaps, the most common and probably the major electrical hazard in the office is the use of extension cords. When used without guidelines, they can quickly create all sorts of problems such as circuit overload and trip hazards. If you must use an extension cord, be sure that it is rated to handle the equipment you're plugging in. Check with Facilities Services Electric shop if in doubt. Also, be sure that it is in good shape and that you don't create another kind of hazard by running the cord under a rug or through a high-traffic area. A generalized list of safety reminders regarding electrical safety in the office area include:

- Avoid overloading outlets. A 120V/20amp general-purpose outlet is generally connected to other receptacles each sharing the same circuit. The circuit is then de-rated, allowing for a maximum load of 18 amps. Don't forget! Amperage varies depending on the particular appliance used. Some appliances, because of voltage or amperage, require a dedicated circuit. Plugging additional equipment into a dedicated circuit may result in overload. Remember! When in doubt – Consult with an electrician.
- Always match plugs and outlets, making sure never to force a three-prong into a two-prong outlet and never use a three-prong plug with one of the prongs missing.
- Check for worn or frayed cords and have them replaced immediately. *Never attempt to tape or splice a defective cord!*

- Never place cords near heat or water.
- Never use electrical equipment when your hands are wet.
- Report any potential electrical problems.

**A** classic tripping hazard in an office is the open file drawer. It sounds so simple, but it happens, please keep drawers closed. Also pay attention to slippery surfaces. This can be a problem in the entrance areas, especially in bad weather when people have tracked in rain or snow. But also be on the lookout for spills and for areas that may have just been mopped or waxed. Another common tripping hazard is loose or torn carpet. When you see these conditions, report them to your supervisor or building maintenance person. Chairs can be dangerous as well. Be especially careful if you use a chair on wheels. Sitting too far forward can be just as dangerous as leaning too far back.

**B**ack injuries, very common and costly for both management and victim. Slip trip and falls are responsible for a large number of workplace back related injuries, but they also come from improper lifting. Remember to lift with your legs, not the back and don't try to lift more than you can safely handle. Always bend at the knees, not the back.

**O**ne final area of concern is hazardous chemicals. Normally this is not a big problem in an office environment, but it is still important and for "safety sake" worth discussing. The average office does not house many hazardous chemicals, but you may come in contact with some. Check material safety data sheets for specific chemicals you may have in your work area and discuss their use with your supervisor. Know how to properly respond in the event of accidental exposure. Again, pay attention and read the labels so you can be aware of any possible danger.

**K**ee in mind that good housekeeping can do a lot to keep the office safe. This means, if you drop it - pick it up! If you use it - put it back! Good housekeeping prevents aisles, stairwells, and hallways from getting cluttered. The result? Good housekeeping can lessen the chance of a fire and falls that may result in personal injury.

**F**inally, let's just use common sense and continue to communicate. If you see a problem - Correct it or report it immediately to someone who can. I know the office is not the most hazardous work environment in the world, but accidents can happen. I just don't want them to happen to you.

\*References

Safety Talks, Safety Meeting Presentations: Office Safety, NC State University.  
<http://www2.ncsu.edu:8010/ehs/www99/right/training/meeting/officeme.html>