Did you Get the Memo on Office Hazards?

What’s at Stake?

An office is almost like a second home to those that work there. Considering how much time a lot of us spend at our office it’s easy to feel that way. It’s also easy to feel comfortable and safe at the office, just like we do at home. But before you get too comfortable, here’s a memo for you: Tens of thousands of injuries and work-related health problems affect office workers each year.

What’s the Danger?

Here are four office hazards you may not have given much thought to:

Slips, trips and falls are often caused by boxes, files or other items piled in walkways. Hazards also include cords, open file cabinet drawers, unsafe use of a ladder or using a chair or box to reach something. These hazards can lead to broken bones, back injuries and injured pride.

Sitting and using a computer, phone, or staring at a monitor all day can cause a great deal of discomfort and ergonomic injuries to office workers. Improperly set up workstations and poor ergonomic work practices put workers at risk for ergonomic injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome, eye strain, and headaches.

Poor indoor air quality is another potential hazard and also one you may not have a lot of control over. Odors and allergens from dust, office materials, and even the carpet can cause respiratory irritation. Faulty or not well maintained heating and cooling systems can also lead to illness.

Damaged power cords, overloaded power strips and outlets are common office fire hazards you probably overlook on a daily basis.

So too is blocked fire safety equipment such as sprinkler heads and portable fire extinguishers. Finally, the improper use of electrical appliances such as space heaters, coffee makers and microwaves are also potential office fire hazards.

How to Protect Yourself

Protecting against slips, trips and falls is easy.

- Clean up spills immediately.
- Keep boxes, files, cords and clutter picked up, put away and out of walkways.
- Push cabinet drawers in when not in use.
- Don’t use chairs, boxes, or anything but a ladder or step-stool to reach items up on shelves or otherwise out of easy reach.
- Use all ladders safely and ask for help if you need it.

If you’re experiencing ergonomic issues, such as pain, tingling or weakness, ask your supervisor for assistance adjusting your workstation. Ergonomic guidelines for office workstation setup include:

- Position the chair, keyboard and monitor in a straight line with your body.
- Maintain a relaxed, neutral posture.
- Sit up straight, adjusting the chair to provide firm back support.
- Let your arms hang loosely at the shoulders.
- Keep your elbows at a 90-degree angle while typing.
- Use an adjustable keyboard tray to position your keyboard and mouse at a comfortable height (usually lower than the desk surface).
- Place your mouse next to the keyboard, and keep it as close as possible to your body, to avoid reaching.
- Adjust the chair’s height so that your feet are firmly on the ground; and finally
- Take rest breaks to stretch and relax your muscles and your eyes.

While you may not have a lot of control over indoor air quality there are some things you can do. Don’t wear heavy perfumes or cologne. Don’t burn scented candles, which is also a fire hazard, and report indoor air quality concerns to your supervisor immediately.

Help prevent fires by following these easy tips:

- Inspect power cords regularly for damaged prongs, exposed or frayed wires. Never use a cord if the third prong has been damaged or removed. Replace if damaged.
- Don’t overload outlets or power strips.
- Don’t leave coffee pots on when they are empty and don’t leave food cooking unattended in a microwave.
- Keep items clear of sprinkler heads; and
- Never block emergency exit routes or emergency exits.

Final Word

Your office can be a safe and comfortable place to work. Do your part and put into practice the tips you just learned to prevent common office hazards.