GENERAL SAFETY AWARENESS IN THE OFFICE

Offices are less hazardous than most production work environments due to the very nature of the work that takes place and the relatively few health and safety hazards in the office environment. Offices just don't harbor as many moving parts, machinery, or chemicals that could cause problems.

However, the relative lack of obvious threats does not mean offices should automatically be considered 'safe.' Even when most environmental hazards are removed, there is still the personal element. People can still perform unsafe acts and create unsafe conditions where there should be none.

This chapter emphasizes the need for all employees, no matter what type of work they perform or where they perform it, to maintain a high level of general safety awareness. In the office this should include awareness of general office hazards such as the ones described in greater detail in earlier chapters. This chapter will focus on:

- housekeeping;
- attire recommendations; and
- health and wellness.

HOUSEKEEPING

Housekeeping is an essential requirement to ensure that any work area remains safe. In offices, good housekeeping not only keeps the workplace clean and reduces hazards; it also presents a more professional, attractive, and favorable impression to clients, customers, vendors, and others who visit our workplace.

Poor housekeeping presents fire hazards, slip, trip, and fall hazards, and the hazard that you may not be able to find something really important when you need it most. But you can avoid poor housekeeping by developing good housekeeping habits.

Good housekeeping practices can be built into our work habits, so that we almost automatically keep our work area neat, clean and free of articles not being used. Use the following tips to incorporate such good housekeeping practices into your routine:

- Clean up a little bit every day. Clear desks of all work papers and files each night before departure. Cleaning up as you go is easier than confronting a mountain of accumulated mess.
- Before you leave each evening, cover any word processing or electronic equipment for which you have a cover.
- Keep walking surfaces and walkways (in your area and the hallway) clear of debris, objects, or materials. Pick up loose objects you see lying there, such as pens, coins, paper clips, or anything else, no matter how small, that might present a tripping hazard. Even small items can cause serious falls.

- Dispose of broken glass or other sharp objects carefully. If you believe they could present a hazard to cleaning or maintenance staff, put the sharp pieces into another container before putting them in the wastebasket.
- Never place boxes, supplies, files or work papers on the floor or on top of cabinets. Store them in approved storage spaces such as file cabinets, desks, or other storage areas. Take care not to stack boxes too high or too tight. Also, clearly label boxes as to their contents.
- Throw garbage away immediately, and recycle paper and containers as soon as you are finished with them.
- Don't post calendars, posters, or anything else on any surface other than a bulletin board. If you want a picture hung, have it hung properly, preferably by maintenance.
- Keep your workspace arranged so that the furniture is not a blocking or tripping hazard. Consider both placement of the furniture and things such as keeping drawers closed at all times and ensuring that nothing is in danger of falling off a desk or file cabinet.
- Don't keep food in your office unless you are eating it immediately. (Check your department's policy on this, some areas do not allow consumption of food except in designated break areas and lunchrooms.)
- Create a good filing system, so you can file memos and other paper documents as soon as you receive them.

ATTIRE RECOMMENDATIONS

The guidelines suggested here should only be used in addition to your City policy, and only if and when they do not contradict City policy, located in Chapter VI, Section 15

Recently the trend has been toward more casual attire in the office workplace. In a way, this is not surprising, and, in fact, casual attire lends itself to safety in the office environment, because looser, more comfortable clothing is preferable.

Follow these guidelines for optimum safety at work:

- wear low heels or flat shoes, rather than high heels (heels of any height may cause a serious tripping or falling hazard);
- maintain good personal hygiene through cleanliness and grooming;
- tie back long hair if you will be working near moving machinery parts either in a plant/production environment or in the office (e.g., while working on a piece of office equipment like the copier if a piece of paper becomes jammed inside);
- wear clothing that is not too loose and not too tight (loose clothing may cause a hazard by catching in equipment, drawers, etc., while too-tight clothing may cause breathing difficulty and discomfort);

- keep nails shorter rather than longer, to avoid snags or catching them on things or having them rip off and cause you pain, and to avoid the ergonomic hazard of hand contortion while using a keyboard.

HEALTH & WELLNESS

You may be wondering what a chapter on health and wellness is doing in a handbook on office safety. Although the correlation is indirect, it is true that general overall health and fitness can contribute to reduced workplace injury and illness. A healthy and fit person is less likely to get injured or ill, on or off the job.

A healthy person who is feeling well is a safer employee, because he or she can focus better on the job, the surroundings, and what he or she is doing. In addition, when you're healthy, you just feel better generally. So keep your mental and physical state as healthy and as well as possible to stay safe and feel good at home and at work.

The three main health and wellness issues examined in this chapter include:

- diet;
- exercise and physical fitness; and
- mental health.

Diet

The first place you can start to work on feeling better and improving your health is with the diet you choose. Enough research has been done in the areas of nutrition and diet to say several things with certainty.

We all know that fats and sugars are generally bad for us, while vegetables and whole grains are generally good for us. We should minimize our consumption of the first group, and try to increase our consumption of the second group. But most of all, we should try to eat a 'balanced diet,' i.e., one characterized by a combination of the right foods that allows us to get all the vitamins, minerals, and protein our bodies need to be healthy.

USDA Dietary Guidelines & Food Pyramid

In order to eat well and healthfully, follow the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommended dietary guidelines, represented visually in the MyPyramid Food Guidance System.

MyPyramid replaces the Food Guide Pyramid and represents the recommended proportion of foods from each food group and focuses on the importance of making smart food choices in every food group, every day. Take a look at some of the MyPyramid recommendations:

Types of Food	How Much Per Day	Foods in the Group
Grains	5-8 ounces	Bread, cereal, crackers, rice, and pasta
Vegetables	2-3 cups	Dark green, orange, starchy, or other vegetables and dry beans and peas
Fruits	1-2 cups	Any fresh, canned, frozen, or dried fruit or 100% fruit juice
Meat and beans	5-6 ounces	Lean cuts of meats, poultry, eggs, nuts, seeds, dry beans, peas, finfish, and shellfish
Milk	3 cups	Milk, milk-based deserts, cheese, yogurt
Oils	5-7 teaspoons	Oils and fats (limit butter, stick margarine, and lard)

MyPyramid incorporates recommendations from the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Physical activity is a new element in the symbol.

Healthful Habits

To practice healthful eating habits at work, avoid these common nutrition pitfalls at the office:

- the morning doughnut and coffee;
- lunch out for fast food or a sit-down meal at a restaurant;
- the afternoon snack break of a candy bar.

Replace these bad eating habits with good ones, like keeping snacks of fruit and vegetables handy for munching in the morning or afternoon, and bringing a healthful lunch instead of going out for a high-fat or high protein one.

Vitamins

Even if you eat properly, you still may need to take dietary supplements in the form of vitamins or minerals. Especially if you are watching your weight, or not eating the number of fruits and vegetables recommended by the FDA, you may need such supplements. Check with your doctor if you think you may need vitamin and mineral supplements.

Some vitamins and minerals may be helpful to counteract specific workplace hazards. For example, vitamins B6 and E help strengthen tendons and muscles, and may be helpful in resistance of such illnesses as carpal tunnel. As you probably know, the mineral, calcium, helps prevent osteoporosis, so ensuring a sufficient quantity of calcium may make your bones stronger and help you avoid breaks or fractures in the event of a fall, so you'd be less likely to sustain a serious injury.

If you do take vitamin and mineral supplements, be careful not to overdo it. Taken in too large of quantities, some vitamins and minerals can cause toxicity problems and poison your body. So if you do take them, take only the recommended daily amount (the U.S. RDA), unless your doctor says otherwise.

Water

In addition to vitamins, water is a key ingredient to health and wellness. We need water to process the nutrients we eat, cleanse our bodies of toxins and impurities, and replenish us after exercise or physical exertion.

We should drink at least eight 8-oz. glasses of water per day. Develop good habits at work to help you drink the recommended amount of water. Instead of going to get a cup of coffee, grab a tall glass of refreshing cold water. When you need to take your hourly eye rest from your computer monitor, go down to the break room for a glass of ice water. A little bit of water all day long will add up to what you need.

Exercise & Physical Fitness

In addition to diet, exercise is the other major ingredient necessary for good physical health. According to the President's Council on Physical Fitness, basic guidelines for good physical fitness include exercising for 30 minutes at least five or more times per week. This exercise can be varying levels, including more strenuous, such as running, jogging, or bicycling, or less strenuous, such as walking on a treadmill or outdoors.

Research has concluded that just about any exercise is good for you, even a walk from your desk down several flights of stairs to the break room and back, or a circuit around the office. Other office habits that can prove to be good exercise include:

- walking over to a nearby office to deliver information or a message, rather than using the phone or email;
- using the stairs instead of the elevator; and
- walking at lunchtime.

Start slowly and build up to a higher frequency and duration of exercise. Consult your doctor if you have any health problems or if you have been inactive.

In addition to exercise and diet, a good night's sleep every night will make you feel better and more alert at work the next day. People's sleep needs vary, but most of us need seven to eight hours of uninterrupted sleep to feel rested and alert.

Some people feel fine with just six hours, but if you cannot get more than five restful hours each night, you should consult a doctor. You may have a sleep disorder, and it may be treatable.

Mental Health

In addition to our struggles with keeping our bodies fit and healthy, we should also consider our mental health and state of mind. Poor mental health can make it difficult to function in your day-to-day work, as well as affecting your physical health and well-being.

This section looks at common mental health problems, workplace problems that can result, and ways in which you can deal with these problems. Stress, dependencies, and other mental health problems are examined in greater detail here.

Stress

What is stress? It is a physical or mental response to the pressures of an event or factors of living in general. Though we tend to speak of it in a negative context, stress can be positive or negative.

Biologically, when stress occurs, your body releases hormones which accelerate your breathing and heart rate, increase your blood sugar levels and blood pressure, and improve blood clotting. Your body gets into a survival mode, readying itself for a physical emergency. This can be a good thing. You have energy and mental agility to get the job done. You are alert and perform well.

As stress continues, your body temporarily adjusts to the stress. If stress is removed during this adjustment period, your body returns to normal. However, if stress goes on for prolonged periods of time your body fails to adjust and wears out, weakening your defenses to disease. A body cannot run on high speed forever. This can lead to 'burnout.' Some stress adds challenge, opportunity, and variety to your life. Too much stress can work against you.

Medically, stress can cause you to suffer high blood pressure, pain, breathing trouble, cancer, digestive disorders, insomnia, and fatigue. Psychologically, you may suffer frustration, irritability, anger, impatience, worry, a lack of self-confidence, poor listening, and violence, alcohol, or drug abuse.

To compound matters, your job can be affected too. Stress can lead to accidents, a loss of priorities, rushing, and anger or inappropriate behavior.

You can deal with stress in the workplace by watching for the warning signs. Become aware of when you are under stress. Look for signs of being in survival mode. Once you are aware of what stresses you, you can manage your stress by using one or more of the following stress-reduction techniques:

- Take breaks and learn to relax fully.
- Release stress with exercise.
- Maintain proper rest and diet so that you can deal with stressful situations.

- Practice deep breathing or yoga to relax body and mind.
- Manage your time. Set priorities and do the most important things first or most.
- Build your self-confidence.
- Share your work if you can't do it all.
- Have fun.
- Laugh and cry to release tension.
- Avoid taking medication or drinking alcohol to eliminate stress temporarily. Your problem will not really be solved.
- Share your stress with others. Talk to a friend. 'Cry on someone's shoulder.'

DEPENDENCIES

Drug and alcohol abuse problems, as well as less common personal dependencies like sexual dependency and Internet addiction, can seriously affect your workplace performance. These dependencies can take over a person's life. The dependent person can lose sight of all other goals except obtaining more of the thing on which he or she is dependent.

This type of problem is very difficult to deal with, because dependency can change the personality, reactions, and judgment of the person involved, as well as making them potentially dangerous in the workplace. Most dependent people are going to need help to overcome their addiction. Places to find this help include:

- Alcoholics' Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA);
- The City's employee assistance program (EAP);
- treatment centers; and
- family support.

Seek help if you think you may have a problem. Tell a friend or loved one if you think they may have a problem. This type of problem does not simply go away, it must be dealt with. Additional information can be found in the City's Drug Free Work Place Program.

MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness may be difficult to recognize or deal with, but it is not an uncommon problem. Mental illnesses include a wide range of disorders that can be mild to severe, depending on the individual. Many mental illnesses can be treated, and many of those affected can function normally in society.

Having a mental illness no longer means you're 'crazy' or should be in a mental hospital. Some common mental illnesses that literally millions of people may have include:

- depression;
- manic depression (a.k.a. bipolar disorder);

- schizophrenia;
- multiple personality disorder;
- neurosis; and
- paranoia.

There are many other mental illnesses as well. If you think you may have one of these or another type of mental illness, you should seek treatment. These problems, like dependencies, almost never go away by themselves. Seek counseling from a certified mental health professional. Use the employee assistance program (EAP) the City provides to you and all members of your household at no expense.

LIGHTING & EYE HAZARDS

Lighting and eye hazards in your office are important considerations. If your eyes get tired or your vision becomes blurred, it is difficult to concentrate, and may even become impossible to keep on working. Unfortunately, in the modern world, most office employees have to work with one major source of eye fatigue, the computer monitor [a.k.a. the video display terminal (VDT)].

VDTs present a range of potential eye hazards that can strain your eyes, make them tired, and cause your productivity (and mood) to decline. In addition to computer-related eye hazards, your eyes may face other lighting hazards in the office, such as copier flash, insufficient task lighting, poor quality reading materials, or eye irritants. All of these potential eye hazards are examined in more detail in this chapter.

You probably have limited control over the main lighting sources in your office. However, this chapter can teach you how to use what you do have control over. You can use what lighting you have more effectively, and make simple changes or additions to your workspace that can solve most or all of your eye strain problems. You can also refer to the Ergonomics in the Office Chapter for more detailed information regarding VDT and desk set up.

OTHER LIGHTING & EYE HAZARD CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to computer-related eye hazards, your eyes may face other lighting hazards in the office. The following potential eye hazards are examined in more detail in this section:

- copier flash;
- task lighting;
- poor quality reading materials; and
- eye irritation.

Copier Flash

Almost all copy machine flash levels for machines in the U.S. are well below the limits recommended for blue light hazard and retinal thermal hazard. Nevertheless, avoid looking directly at the copier flash. The flash can leave afterimages that are annoying and can distract from tasks performed after copying. Long periods of continuous copying while looking at the flash could cause even more serious discomfort.

The best solution is to copy with the copier cover down, if at all possible. This not only makes it easier on your eyes, but also saves valuable toner and copier wear. If the material you are copying is bulky or awkward, and you must keep the cover of the copier up while you copy, then avert your gaze from the flash to save wear and tear on your eyes.

Task Lighting

Normal office lighting should be supplemented by individual 'task lighting' at a workstation if necessary. Task lighting enables the user to adjust lighting to his or her personal preference. Task or desk lamps may sometimes be needed for shadowed areas, reading documents with poor print quality, or tasks involving small details.

Individuals who use task lighting should be careful it does not result in unnecessary glare problems on their own screen or document or on their neighbors'. Common types of task lighting available include:

- natural lighting from a window or skylight;
- swinging arm lamps;
- desk or banker's lamps; and
- under-shelf or under-cabinet lights.

Poor Quality Reading Materials

Although sometimes reading materials may be improved enough to be read with better task lighting, poor quality reading materials are another common source of eye strain in the office workplace. The reading material may be a bad computer printout, a poor-quality copy from a copy machine, or a glossy magazine that reflects any light shined its way.

When confronted with any of these reading material problems, you can try to improve the situation by:

- adding a task light;
- reducing the duration of time spent reading that document or material;
- getting a better quality or enlarged copy of the same material; or
- taking more frequent breaks.

Eye Irritation

Finally, some people may experience eye irritation due to environmental factors. Sometimes, something in the air bothers our eyes. Some examples of potential eye irritants include:

- excessive heat,
- garage and traffic fumes,
- irritating dusts,
- low humidity or ozone (from photocopiers and other electric machines).

Some people have more sensitive eyes than others, so reactions to these environmental factors will vary. Not everyone will be irritated by the same thing. If any of the factors in the bulleted list above is causing problems, mention it to your supervisor, safety manager, or other person responsible for safety in your office.

OFFICE EQUIPMENT

While at work, we all use a variety of office equipment that enables us to do our jobs. This equipment ranges from the very simple to the complex, from the electrically-powered to the hand-held and mechanically-powered, from the desktop computer to the stapler.

Each and every piece of office equipment we use has the potential to harm us, if we use it incorrectly, hastily, or without care. Most office equipment presents relatively minor hazards, such as cuts or punctures, but some could present a greater hazard, such as electrocution. Whatever the hazard, we should avoid it by thinking about what we're doing and how we're doing it.

This chapter lays out general equipment use guidelines. In addition, because so much equipment in the office these days is electrical, some basic electrical safety tips are offered. Finally, the most common types of office equipment, their associated hazards, and methods to avoid those hazards are also stated in this chapter.

The following topics are examined in this chapter:

- general equipment use guidelines;
- basic electrical safety tips;
- equipment with cutting or puncture hazards;
- adding machines;
- file cabinets, drawers, and other furnishings;
- copiers, fax machines, and printers; and
- computers and video display terminals (VDTs).

General Equipment Use Guidelines

Although the following guidelines on usage of office equipment may not apply to every piece of office equipment you use, these guidelines are generally applicable to most office equipment.

1. Only use equipment that you know how to operate. Never attempt to operate unfamiliar equipment without reading the equipment instructions or receiving directions from a qualified employee.
2. Make sure equipment that tends to move during operation is secured before use.
3. Don't place equipment too near the edge of a table or desk.
4. Make sure guards are in place on equipment that requires them (e.g., copiers) before using that equipment.
5. Don't use equipment that appears defective in any way.

BASIC ELECTRICAL SAFETY TIPS

These days, electrically-powered equipment is considered necessary to help us perform our jobs. Electrically-powered equipment in the office includes such things as computers, copiers, printers, fax machines, clocks, radios, lamps, coffee makers, microwaves, and space heaters, among others.

With all of this equipment, offices can quickly become congested with cords and cables, which can easily become tripping and fire hazards. In addition, although the function of such equipment varies, their power source gives them some common hazards.

Follow these safety tips to avoid the hazards of electrically-powered equipment.

1. Unplug defective electrically-powered equipment and have it repaired as soon as possible. In addition, unplug any equipment before performing maintenance or repair.
2. Keep electric cables, cords, and plugs clean and free from kinks, cuts, chemical damage, fraying, and tears.
3. Carry equipment at its base, never by its cord.
4. Use extension cords only temporarily (e.g., during remodeling or maintenance). If you need them longer than temporarily, place a work order to evaluate for possible permanent wiring.
5. Avoid running cords through holes in walls, ceilings, floors, doorways, and windows. Additionally, don't string them across aisles or walkways where someone may trip or fall over them.
6. Replace equipment with damaged or defective cords, or point out the hazard to your manager or safety manager, so he or she can have it replaced.
7. When using electrically-operated office equipment, avoid touching grounded metal objects.
8. Do not overload electrical outlets by using extension devices to increase the number of outlets at that socket.

EQUIPMENT WITH CUTTING OR PUNCTURE HAZARDS

Some pieces of office equipment we use daily present cutting or puncture hazards, due to their sharp blades, fine points, and other cutting or puncturing features. Though we seldom consider the hazard seriously, we probably get annoyed even by the nagging pain of a simple paper cut.

Yet paper cuts are one of the most common injuries in the office, as insignificant as they may seem. And a paper cut can become infected and present a greater health problem than initially expected. Beyond paper, however, other types of equipment present greater cutting or puncture threats.

The following table lays out equipment with cutting hazards and equipment with puncture hazards.

Equipment With Cutting Hazards	Equipment With Puncture Hazards
paper cutters	staplers
letter openers	hole punchers
paper edges	uncapped pens and pencils
exacto knives	thumbtacks and push pins
scissors	spindles (to hold or fasten paper on a desktop)
fan blades	staple pullers
paper shredders	

Because the wide range of equipment listed above is capable of causing injury, use common sense with these seemingly harmless everyday items.

Follow these general guidelines when using equipment with cutting or puncture hazards:

- use care and precaution when using this equipment, and don't rush through the job;
- use equipment only for its intended purpose, not for activities for which it was not intended;
- always use any safety guards on the equipment, and keep them in place when the equipment is not in use (e.g., close hand-operated paper cutters after each use and activate the guard; keep cap on spindle when not placing a piece of paper on spike);
- for the electrically-powered ones in this group, make sure the equipment is unplugged before conducting maintenance, repair, or trouble-shooting.

ADDING MACHINES

When using adding machines, you should follow the safety precautions already covered in the Basic Electrical Safety Tips section of this chapter. However, in addition to the electrical safety hazards, there is another hazard associated with heavy use of adding machines — the threat of carpal tunnel syndrome.

If you use an adding machine occasionally to work out figures for a report or calculate averages or amounts, you probably don't have to worry about this threat. However, if your job involves daily, intensive use of an adding machine, your hand may suffer as a result.

Using an adding machine for extended periods of time requires that you perform repeated motion, and contortion of your hand into an uncomfortable position that may have long-term effects. See the Ergonomics chapter in this handbook if you think your use of an adding machine may be a risk factor or for more information on carpal tunnel syndrome and other ergonomic concerns in the office.

FILE CABINETS, DRAWERS, & OTHER FURNISHINGS

We may not immediately consider the furnishings that make up our office to be dangerous in any way. However, some issues relating to their arrangement and use are relevant to safety in the office.

To start with, arrange your office furnishings in a manner that provides unobstructed areas for movement as much as possible. In addition, keep the office in good order (see Good Housekeeping and Slips Trips, & Falls sections in this handbook).

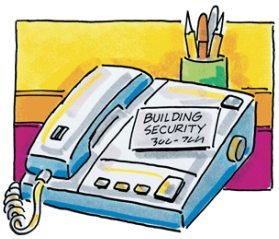
Finally, use the following specific tips for file cabinets, shelves, and drawers.

Furnishing	Safety Tips For Use Of Furnishing
file cabinets	✓ open only one drawer at a time; ✓ close drawers when they are not in use; ✓ don't place heavy objects on top of cabinets and be aware that things on top may fall off if a drawer is opened suddenly; ✓ close drawers slowly, and use the handle to avoid pinched or crushed fingers; ✓ fill the bottom drawer first to stabilize.
shelves	✓ place heavy objects on the bottom or lowest shelf; ✓ keep at least 18 inches between top shelf items and the ceiling if a ceiling sprinkler system is provided; ✓ never climb on shelves, use an approved ladder to climb or to reach for anything out of reach.
desks	✓ keep desks in good condition (free from sharp edges, protruding screws, etc.); ✓ do not climb on desks; ✓ keep drawers closed when not in use; ✓ repair or report any desk damage that could be hazardous.

THEFT PREVENTION

Office workers can take the following precautions to guard against theft or other security threats in the office:

1. Be familiar with your office building and any crime problems in or around the area.
2. Lock all doors when leaving, even for brief periods of time, and keep the office door locked as much as possible when such access is not necessary for the operation of the business. In addition, lock your desk when leaving your work space for lunch, at break, or at the end of the day.
3. Avoid working late in office buildings. If you must, keep doors locked, and don't open them to anyone you are not expecting. Make sure someone knows you are working late and have them keep in touch with you.



4. Have your telephone close at hand and in a location where it can be used immediately in times of emergency.
5. Know your neighbors. Know who works at what time and who can be of help during emergencies. Extend your cooperation to your neighbors should they need your help.
6. Be especially careful when leaving your office and going to your car. Garages and parking areas are prime attack and/or mugging locations. If at all possible, have yourself escorted to your car after dark.
7. Should some stranger or suspicious person enter your office, immediately proceed to give them a story that indicates that someone is going to arrive very soon. Such a 'white lie' might prevent the stranger from trying something, since he believes someone is going to arrive soon.

ELEVATOR SECURITY

Elevators present special security risks, because they are a small enclosed space in which it may prove difficult to protect yourself. Yet in many office buildings elevators provide the only logical transport up many flights.

Because everyone uses elevators occasionally, and you may even use them daily at work or where you live, follow these guidelines to protect yourself:

1. Never get into an elevator if you see a suspicious person in the elevator. Should you arrive at your desired floor and see a suspicious person lurking on the floor, don't get out. Take the elevator to another floor where there are other people.

2. The safest way to ride is with someone you know, someone who works in or visits the building. Be wary of riding with people who simply appear, by their nature, suspicious, e.g., a gang of teenage thugs.

3. When entering an elevator, always position yourself within hands reach of the control panel. This will enable you to hit the alarm button should the need arise.