Occupational Health Hazards in Office Environment

Introduction

Office work is generally regarded as clean, easy and safe. Although, life-threatening accidents in offices are rare, there are still various factors endangering the health of white-collar office workers that should not be neglected. Major factors include:

- Work stress
- Air quality
- Tobacco smoke
- Ergonomic hazards
- Chemicals
1. Work Stress
People who work under stress may develop some unhealthy reactions such as headaches, stomach and intestinal disorders, sleeping disorders, anxiety and depression. It can even lead to high blood pressure and other cardiovascular diseases etc.

2. Air quality
Many buildings have severe indoor air pollution problems and this is an occupational safety and health issue that office workers always complain about. Poor ventilation design and hazardous gases released by building materials such as radon as well as the chemical substances emitted by office equipment can accumulate over a long period to create indoor air pollution. In addition, microorganisms such as mould fungus and bacteria can breed in air-conditioning systems and refrigeration towers that have not been properly maintained. The growth of mould fungus and bacteria suspended in the airborne can increase risk of respiratory tract infection and cause allergy. It can further lead to “sick building syndrome”.

3. Chemicals
Correction fluid, toners for photocopiers and faxes and liquid detergents are chemicals commonly used in office environment. These chemicals contain hazardous substances that can cause skin allergies or dermatitis.

4. Tobacco smoke
Tobacco smoke is one of the air pollutants found in office. The smoke and particulates given off by the burning end of a cigarette are irritating but actually carcinogenic. Therefore, the concentration of respirable suspended particulates in a smoking office is 5 times greater than that in a smoke-free office. Smoking not only endangers the health of smokers but also affects the health of their non-smoking colleagues. Apart from eyes, nose and throat irritation, second-hand smoke notably increases non-smokers chances of suffering from coughs, asthma, excessive phlegm, decreased lung function and lung cancer.

5. Ergonomic hazards
The prevalent use of computers in offices has created a new health problem. Prolonged viewing of a VDU may cause visual discomfort. There is also increased risk of developing muscle discomfort in upper limbs when performing prolonged keyboard operation in extended forearm position. Discomfort can also arise from the contact stress against the edges of the work surface. Workstation and chair with poor ergonomic design or prolonged seating without a stretch may develop low back pain and muscle pain in lower limbs. Severe consequence may result in carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis and tenosynovitis.

Conclusion
We must pay attention to the above mentioned health hazards in office environment and make improvement necessarily. The easiest way to organize is to prohibit smoking at workplace and to give encouragement to those who give up smoking. This is the first step to improving office safety and is something you definitely can achieve.
Prize Quiz

The Sedentary Workers Safety & Health Committee has included a prize quiz to this bulletin to help raise awareness of work safety. We look forward to your participation. If you can answer the following three questions correctly, you can enter the lucky draw and have an opportunity to receive one of a total of 3 shopping vouchers to the value of $500.

1. Of the five office hazards discussed in the text, which preventative method is relatively easy to achieve?
   
   (a) Work stress  
   (b) Air quality  
   (c) Tobacco smoke  
   (d) Ergonomic hazards  
   (e) Chemicals

2. How many times greater is the concentration of respirable suspended particulates in a smoking office than a smoke-free office?
   
   (a) 5 times  
   (b) 50 times  
   (c) 500 times  
   (d) No obvious difference

3. What is the occupational safety and health problem that office workers always complain about?
   
   (a) Work Stress  
   (b) Air quality  
   (c) Tobacco smoke  
   (d) Ergonomic hazards  
   (e) Chemicals

Please circle the correct answers and fill in the following form and send it or fax it to the main office of the Council. Please write “Sedentary Workers Safety & Health Bulletin Prize Quiz” on the envelope. **Closing date: 30 October, 2001**

Name:  
Identity card number:  
Address:  
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Rules for participation

1. The above personal details will only be used by our Council for the purposes of the Prize Quiz.

2. Each participant may only enter once.

3. The employees and direct family members of the organising body are not eligible to enter.

4. The decision of the organising body regarding the prize results is final.

5. The organising body reserves the right to make changes to any matters related to the competition and will not provide further notice.

6. In the event of any dispute, all decisions by the organising body are final.