

Health and Safety Programs

Office Safety - General

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Why is health and safety important in office environments?

All workplaces - no matter how big or small - are responsible for the health and safety of their workers. Maintaining a safe and healthy office requires identifying the different types of hazards, assessing their risks, and implementing measures to prevent injury or illness. A variety of factors influence health and safety in an office, including the physical environment, workstation design, psychological factors, products used or stored, and the type of work activities.

What are the common duties of an office worker?

Office workers perform the majority of their work on a computer. Their workstation usually has a desktop computer or laptop, monitor, keyboard, mouse, and telephone, along with other equipment.

Common duties of an office worker include:

- Attending in-person or virtual meetings
- Researching and preparing reports
- Using software systems to input, maintain, and analyze data
- Answering phone calls and responding to emails
- Delivering presentations
- Photocopying, printing, and collating documents

- Communicating with other workers and management
 - Collaborating with internal and external stakeholders
 - Planning and scheduling team meetings
 - Organizing events (meetings, etc.).
 - Interacting with clients or customers who may be upset or angry (e.g., potential for harassment or bullying).
 - Being aware of client or customer actions while on the premises (e.g., be alert to potential issues or acts of theft).
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What are common hazards found in an office?

Health and safety hazards can be divided into the following categories: safety hazards, health hazards, ergonomic hazards, and psychosocial hazards. Below are some examples of each:

Safety Hazards: Safety includes workplace conditions and work practices that can cause incidents or injury. Potential safety hazards include:

- **Slips, Trips, and Falls:** Slips, trips, and falls are the most common cause of injury at work. Injuries can include sprains, bruises, concussions as well as fractures. Slips occur when there is too little friction or traction between the footwear and the walking surface. Trips occur when the foot collides with an object causing the person to lose balance and eventually fall. Obstructed view, poor lighting, uncovered cables, damaged carpeting, and uneven flooring can result in tripping. See [Prevention of Slips, Trips and Falls](#) and [Workplace Housekeeping – Basic Guide](#) for more information.
- **Injuries from cabinets and shelves:**
 - Store objects in a way that reduces the chance of them falling from the shelf or cabinet.
 - Always make sure to load the shelves or cabinet drawers evenly, starting with the heaviest and least used materials in the bottom.
 - Arrange cabinets so that drawers do not open into doorways or hallways (where the pathway may be blocked, or people may collide with the open drawer).
 - Close drawers slowly, using the handle to avoid pinching fingers.
 - Never place heavy items or hazardous products on top of cabinets. These items can cause injury when they fall or spill on a person.
 - Do not overload shelves.

- **Electrical and fire hazards:** Electrical incidents are usually a result of faulty or defective equipment or the misuse of devices such as extension cords and power strips. Before using an electrical device, inspect for any damage. Frayed wires and cables can cause electric shocks and result in a fire hazard. Only use equipment that has been certified by Canadian Standard Association (CSA) or Underwriters Laboratories (UL). Always disconnect electrical equipment from its power source before investigating, cleaning, adjusting, or clearing a jam. To learn more, see [Electrical Safety - Basic Information](#).

Health Hazards: Workplace conditions and work practices that can cause illness, either immediately or decades after exposure, are referred to as health hazards. Potential health hazards include:

- **Indoor air quality:** Indoor air quality (IAQ) can impact the health, comfort, well-being, and productivity of workers. IAQ is affected by ventilation and heating systems, sources of contaminants (e.g., mould, chemicals, smoke, etc.), the number of building occupants, moisture, humidity, and overall cleanliness of the workplace. Exposure to poor air quality can cause health issues such as dryness and irritation of the eyes, nose, throat and skin, headaches, fatigue, sinus congestion, shortness of breath, allergies, nausea, and dizziness. See [Indoor Air Quality – General](#) for more information.
- **Thermal comfort:** Thermal comfort is achieved when a person wearing a normal amount of clothing feels neither too cold nor too warm. Maintaining thermal comfort enables people to function better, both physically and mentally. Thermal comfort is influenced by both personal and environmental factors, including a person's metabolic rate, choice of clothing, air temperature, radiant temperature, solar loading, air speed and humidity. To learn more, see [Thermal Comfort for Office Work](#).
- **Noise:** Noise is defined as “unwanted sound” Even at low levels, a noisy environment can result in negative health impacts and decreased productivity if it is too loud or if exposed for too long. Noise can increase stress levels and interfere with concentration and communication. See [Noise – Basic Information](#) and [Noise – Non-auditory Effects](#) to learn more.
- **Lighting:** Poor lighting not only causes visual discomfort, but it can also cause people to adopt poor or awkward posture. Eye strain and poor posture can lead to fatigue, headache, stress and pain in the shoulders, neck and back. When creating a good visual environment, both the intensity and the quality of light are important. See [Lighting Ergonomics](#) and [Eye Discomfort in the Office](#) to create a visually safe environment.
- **Scents:** Scents are often thought of as the smells or odours from cosmetics or from other products such as air fresheners and cleaners. Exposure can make it difficult for some people to function effectively at work. Common symptoms include headaches, dizziness, skin irritation, nausea, and fatigue. To learn more about how to manage scents in the workplace, see [Scent-Free Policy for the Workplace](#).

- **Chemicals:** Cleaning products are common chemicals that are used in the workplace. Many factors influence whether a product will cause health issues, including the exact ingredients in the product, how the product is stored, the ventilation in the area where the product is used, how long the exposure is, and how a person is exposed (such as through the skin or inhalation). Health effects range from skin rashes, irritation of the eyes and nose, to upper respiratory issues such as coughing and asthma. Note that while the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) legislation may exempt employers from the need to obtain a safety data sheet (SDS) for consumer products such as common cleaning products, the legislation does require workers to be educated and trained about the health effects, safe use, storage, and disposal of consumer chemical products used in the workplace. For more guidance, please see [Consumer Chemical Products in the Workplace](#) or [WHMIS](#).

Ergonomic Hazards: Working under poor ergonomic conditions for prolonged periods of time can result in cause muscle or joint injuries. Long working hours, awkward or fixed postures, sitting, incorrect workstation setup, poor lighting, high rate of repetitive manual tasks, use of excessive force, and improper [manual material handling](#) techniques can result in adverse health effects including eye strain, headaches, and [work-related musculoskeletal disorders](#) (WMSDs).

Other OSH Answers factsheets provide guidelines on the various factors that influence [ergonomics](#), including workstation design considerations, risks related to MSDs and control measures to prevent the health risks associated with poor ergonomics in the office.

Psychosocial Hazards: There are various factors that can contribute to [psychological health](#), including:

- [stress](#)
- [working alone](#)
- hours of work (such as an [extended workday](#) or [shiftwork](#))
- pace of work
- conflicting demands
- characteristics of the workplace
- [bullying](#)
- [violence, and harassment](#).

What should an office health and safety program include?

Health and Safety Policies and Procedures

Commitment to providing a safe workplace starts with establishing policies and procedures that all workers must follow. Examples of policies include:

- [Health and safety policy](#)
- [Smoke-free workplace](#)
- [Harassment and violence prevention](#)

For example, in Canada, all jurisdictions require a harassment or violence prevention policy and program in most workplaces. [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace - Legislation](#) provides a summary of the legislative requirements for each jurisdiction.

In addition to health and safety policies, having documented safe work procedures helps workers understand how to work safely. Some examples of procedures include:

- Reporting and investigation of incidents
- Workplace inspections
- Lifting and moving objects
- Slips, trips and falls
- Housekeeping
- Electrical equipment
- Ergonomics
- First aid and emergency response

Process for Reporting and Investigating Incidents

Immediate [reporting of hazardous conditions or practices](#) helps to notify the employer that there is a concern or that an incident occurred. Establish an incident reporting process which encourages prompt reporting. Reporting will also provide the opportunity to initiate an investigation. [Investigations](#) are a fact-finding process that aims to discover the root cause(s) of an incident. Correcting the causes will help prevent future events.

Workplace Inspections

[Workplace inspections](#) help to identify existing or potential hazards. The health and safety legislation in most Canadian jurisdictions requires health and safety committees or representatives to conduct workplace inspections at a defined frequency. Supervisors and managers may also be required to perform inspections. See [Checklist for Offices](#) for a sample checklist that you can customize to suit your workplace.

Health and Safety Training

The health and safety legislation in all Canadian jurisdictions requires employers to provide information and instruction to protect the health and safety of their workers. All workers must receive general safety training covering topics such as their responsibilities and accountabilities under the health and safety act and regulations, safe work practices and procedures related to hazards in the workplace, and the health and safety policy and program. In addition to general safety training, workers must also receive specialized or specific training based on their job or role. Examples include those who use chemicals such as cleaning products, conduct maintenance work, play a critical role in emergency response (e.g., first aid responder), etc.

Before starting any new job or task, workers should be made aware of any health and safety concerns about the environment they will be working in, the hazards they may encounter, the work procedures needed to work safely, how to respond to an emergency, and how to protect themselves from injury or illness. See [Employee Orientation Checklist](#) for a sample checklist that you can customize to your workplace.

Emergency Response Plan

[Emergency response planning](#) outlines procedures for handling a sudden or unexpected situation. The emergency plan should include all possible emergencies, consequences, critical roles, required actions and instructions. The plan should consider the size of the workplace, the surrounding neighbourhood, the physical layout of the workplace, and the type of activities or equipment being used in the building. It should also include floor plans, maps showing evacuation routes, contact information of emergency response personnel (internal and external), and their duties and responsibilities.

Housekeeping Program

Having an effective [housekeeping](#) program can help to proactively control or eliminate workplace hazards. There are several benefits of good housekeeping practices:

- Increases indoor air quality
- Decreases slips, trips, and falls by keeping work areas clear of clutter
- Decreases fire hazards by reducing the accumulation of waste, debris, and flammable materials
- Reduces worker exposure to hazardous products by making sure the products are stored correctly
- Reduces worker injury because equipment and tools are maintained
- Reduces property damage

- Reduces overall work-related stress and improves morale

Using a [housekeeping checklist](#) is a systematic way to ensure your workplace is clean, hygienic, well-organized, and safe for all workers.

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