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Ergonomic injury prevention relies on ‘suggestions’

SCF Arizona your Work Comp Specialist

Provided by Mike Felix
Association Coordinator

No rules

It doesn't make sense to squeeze a 250-pound individual into a working space designed for a 150-pound worker. Over time, that larger employee eventually will show signs of strain from being cramped into an area that doesn't fit.

“You can actually feel the stress when the work station isn't designed for you,” said Ray Diaz, SCF Arizona's safety logistic coordinator. “(But) OSHA doesn't have any regulations for ergonomics, only suggestions.”

Those suggestions include providing adequate room and equipment that accommodate the individual, rather than forcing the worker to fit the space and materials, which is what ergonomics is all about. Well-designed workplaces can help prevent:

- Repetitive stress injuries
- Cumulative trauma disorders
- Musculoskeletal disorders

These three hazards can result in nerve injuries in the hands, arms, shoulders, neck, back and lower limbs. By speaking up and alerting supervisors, a worker can be proactive in ensuring ergonomically designed work spaces to avoid putting unnecessary stress and strain on the body.

For example, one of the most common injuries to workers who enter data on a keyboard is carpal tunnel syndrome, which is an irritation of the sheath that protects a nerve in the wrist. If a person begins feeling pain in the wrist, modifications can be made to prevent a full-blown injury, which may require surgery and months of rehabilitation, Diaz said.

“Simple modifications can be made to ensure the person is in the right position in front of the keyboard; the height of the monitor is correct; the chair fits to take away the stress that can build up in the neck and upper shoulders. Lighting is crucial,” he continued.

“You can only offer these as suggestions. You can't require them like you can require a hard hat in a construction zone, because OSHA has no regulations for ergonomics,” Diaz repeated.

Another suggestion he offered for anyone who sits for the majority of the work day is to have a chair that has proper back support, including the lumbar region. This helps to alleviate stress in the shoulders and neck as well as ease lower back stiffness or pain.

“Seat angle is also important,” Diaz said. “If it's raised too high, then it will have a tendency to impede circulation in the bottom of the leg, so your seat pan should have a downward angle.”

Potential problems also may come from jobs that require working in positions that force twisting, bending, squatting or stooping. This is especially true for musculoskeletal disorders, such as back injury, strains and sprains.

Generally, an ergonomic-related injury is less expensive to treat if it is caught in the early stages. If the disability becomes serious, medical costs and workers' compensation claims can be costly.

If you would like more information on workplace safety please contact your Association Coordinator Mike Felix

SCF ARIZONA
3030 N 3RD Street
Phoenix, AZ 85012
Phone: 602.339.7992
Fax: 602.631.2609
E-mail: mfelix@scfaz.com

UPCOMING SCF ARIZONA EVENTS:

Phoenix Safety Works Expo June 24, 2010, details and registration information at www.regonline.com/swphoenix10



Here are some repetitive stress injury risk factors workers and employers should know:

- Repetitive motion – Performing the same motion or motion pattern every few seconds for hours at a time.
- Awkward posture – A neutral position puts the least amount of physical strain on the body whether standing or sitting. Postures that differ from the body’s neutral position increases stress on the body.
- Rest between tasks – A lack of recovery time between repetitive tasks leads to the cumulative effect of the injury. (Diaz recommends stretching, getting up and walking around and doing simple isometrics periodically.)
- Forceful movement – This includes unscrewing rusted bolts, squeezing objects repeatedly or resting the hands against a sharp edge of a desk while working at a computer.
- Vibrations – Exposure to such items as power tools, which affect particular parts of the body.
- Uncomfortable environmental conditions – High temperature and humidity can cause drowsiness. Excessive noise can damage hearing. Glare and bright lighting can cause headaches and vision problems.
- Stressful work organization – This refers to the way jobs are organized. This can include staffing levels, scheduling workload, job pacing and electronic monitoring.

For more information on ergonomics, visit www.scfaz.com. SCF policyholders can call their assigned safety consultant for an ergonomics evaluation.

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