What You Need To Know About…

**Office Safety**

Many people think health and safety principles apply only to factory workers and work environments where heavy equipment is used. But what about the office? It’s a workplace, too.

Workplace health and safety issues don’t stop at the office door. Employees working in office environments may be exposed to many potential hazards, which can be eliminated by following good safety practices to identify and manage the risks.

**General Safety Principles**

*Lifting and carrying objects:*
Look after your back and prevent injuries by knowing your limits and asking for help to lift heavy objects or awkward loads. Always use safe lifting techniques. Take extra care if objects you carry block or limit your view of the path ahead - they can lead to a serious collision. Always approach swinging doors cautiously.

*Reaching for objects:*
Always use a sturdy stool or step-ladder to reach objects stored overhead. Never stand on a table, bench, carton or chair with wheels - they don’t provide secure support. Standing on chairs to reach high shelves is dangerous practice - it’s much safer to use a step stool or stepladder. But when you do use them, make sure you're not in front of a door that can swing inward and knock over the ladder or stool. In addition, some chairs can be tipped over if you lean back too far. Always try to store heavy objects on or close to floor level.

*Trip hazards:*
Keep office areas, including stairwells, walkways and exits, free of rubbish and clutter so people don’t trip over. Make sure electrical cords are kept organised and away from walkways or areas where they could cause a person to trip. Put things away immediately after use to avoid accumulating clutter that may lead to tripping.

*Slips and falls:*
Always clean up spills immediately to prevent slipping. Provide mats for people to wipe their feet when they enter the building, especially in wet weather. Where floor surfaces are slippery, use non-slip backed mats to prevent slips and falls. Use warning signs if floors are wet or slippery, and try to avoid walking on them. Always put packaging materials and strapping straight into the rubbish so someone doesn’t trip on it. When using stairways and walkways, always use the handrail and watch where you are going. Walk – don’t run. In NZ, keep to the left, and slow down as you approach corners. If the surface is wet, go a bit slower and take extra care, especially if your shoes may be prone to slipping or surfaces are slick.

*Filing cabinets:*
Place filing cabinets away from thoroughfares, and keep drawers closed when not in use – don’t leave them open where someone may run into them (desk drawers, too). Only open one drawer at a time, and close it immediately after removing files. Always try to store the heaviest materials in the bottom drawers and avoid overloading the top drawers, so the cabinet is not top-heavy and prone to tipping. Use handles to close drawers, to avoid catching fingers in the drawers. Keep files loosely packed to prevent hand or wrist injuries when working with files. Never open a drawer if someone is crouched beneath it.

**Cuts and puncture wounds:**
Paper cuts are common in the office, and they are often brushed off as insignificant. But a paper cut can become infected like any other open wound, so it should be cleaned and properly treated to prevent infection. Take care with sharp objects commonly found in desk drawers - e.g., sharp pencils, cutting tools, drawing pins, staples, etc - to avoid puncture wounds or cuts. Use staple removers to take out staples, and always keep fingers away from operating parts when refilling staplers. Keep cutting blades sheathed when not in use, and razor blades should only be used with a proper cutting holder such as a Stanley knife. Pointed objects should face away from you, and scissors should be carried by securely holding the closed blades.

**Office equipment and machinery:**
Make sure machines with moving parts have appropriate guards in place, and only operate machinery for which you have adequate training. Ensure long hair and loose clothing such as neckties or loose sleeves are kept well away from machinery to avoid injuries from becoming entangled. Keep guillotine knives secured in ‘down’ position when not in use. Watch for rebound of the spring-loaded cutter arm when releasing the blade, keep fingers clear when cutting, and repair any loose or broken springs immediately. Keep your attention on the task you are performing. Seemingly commonplace office tools and equipment can be potential hazards if you do not treat them thoughtfully with alertness and respect.

**Lighting:**
There should be sufficient lighting so you don’t have to strain to see, but office lights should never be too harsh or positioned in a manner that can cause eyestrain. Always turn on the lights before entering dark rooms or corridors, and report any area with inadequate lighting.

**Unstable furniture:**
Heavy equipment or any furniture over one metre tall should be braced to ensure it won’t tip and injure someone or block an exit in the event of an earthquake. Avoid tilting back in a straight chair, and don’t lean back too far in a swivel chair. Avoid over-reaching.

**Unsafe equipment:**
Any office equipment or machines which are in unsafe condition – i.e., broken, guard missing, etc – should not be used. Label the equipment “unsafe” and notify a manager or supervisor to have it taken care of. Watch out for any protruding nails, sharp edges, splinters, burrs, etc on furniture or equipment – always report them to maintenance personnel to be fixed. Move away from your desk if work is being carried out overhead.
**Pedestrian traffic:**
Watch for vehicles when leaving the building or walking in plant areas. Where pedestrian walkways are designated, keep within the boundaries for your own safety, and always watch for vehicles and machinery. Forklift drivers may not see or hear pedestrians, so keep an eye on them — if in doubt, wait until they have finished their task and you can be sure that they are aware of your presence. Be particularly careful walking around blind corners or past obstructions where other pedestrians or vehicles may collide with you. Obey all warning signs and observe barricades — they are there for everyone’s safety. Never jump from a loading dock, platform or elevation — always use steps and handrails provided. Be aware that drivers backing vehicles have obstructed vision and may not be able to see pedestrians, so stay out of their way.

**Workplace hazards:**
If you notice any unsafe work practices, equipment or conditions, notify your manager or supervisor straight away. This allows the situation to be addressed promptly, preventing injuries to you or your workmates. Always avoid horseplay — it can cause injuries, and in many workplaces this can be grounds for disciplinary action. If work activities require you to enter factory areas, always use the required PPE (i.e., eye protection, safety shoes, high-visibility clothing, etc) for your own safety. If in doubt about what is required, talk to the department manager or supervisor.

**Fire Safety Principles**

*Fire-stop doors:*
Fire-stop doors are designed to resist flames and prevent smoke or fire from spreading through the building, but they are only effective if they are kept closed. Never prop open self-closing fire-rated doors.

*Emergency exits*
Always keep emergency exits and their approaches clear to make sure they can be used safely in the event of a building evacuation. Blocked egress paths could result in being trapped or tripped up during an emergency evacuation. You should always know the location of at least TWO emergency exits, in case one is blocked in a real emergency.

*Emergency evacuation:*
Every building should have evacuation procedures, which you should be familiar with. Find out who the building warden is and their role in the event of an emergency. Be aware of how evacuation requirements will be communicated (i.e., alarms, etc), and know where to assemble and who to report to after evacuating the building.

*Fire-fighting equipment:*
Know the location of the closest fire alarm call point, and be aware of where to find the nearest fire extinguisher. Since different types of extinguishers are used to fight different types of fires, make sure you know which type of extinguisher is available and what type of fire it can be used to fight. Employees should be formally trained to use fire extinguishers before attempting to use them.
Ergonomics Principles

Workstation:
If you are working at a computer for more than 4 hours per day, have the workstation set-up assessed for ergonomics. This will ensure the least strain on your body while you work and minimise the risk of occupational over-use or strain injuries arising from poor body positioning.

Video display units (VDUs):
If you spend a lot of time working at a computer and using the VDU, take a five-minute break from the computer approximately every half hour to avoid eye-strain. Take standing breaks at least hourly – get up out of the chair and move around. Have periodic eye examinations to ensure use of VDUs does not lead to eyestrain or deterioration of vision.

Occupational Overuse:
Repetitive tasks or sustained postures may strain muscles or ligaments. To prevent Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS), take occasional mini-breaks away from the task and stretch the affected parts of the body. Stretching exercises and other information about OOS prevention can be found in the publications section of the OSH Department of Labour website: www.osh.govt.nz

Electrical Safety Principles

Electric cords:
Keep wiring organised and out of the way to prevent tripping or entanglement. Avoid putting carpet over wiring, as it may conceal frayed cords and increase the risk of fires.

Extension cords:
Only use extension cords for temporary power supply – i.e., less than 30 days. Otherwise, it’s best to install permanent wiring where possible.

Power Strips:
Power strips or multiple plug adapters should not be used in multiple combinations, as you may overload the circuit, causing overheating and blown fuses, and increasing the risk of fire. Never plug a power strip into another power strip or into an extension cord.

Sockets:
Always use the right type of socket for the plug. If using equipment designed for another country’s power system, always check that you can safely use it with the existing electricity system, and use the correct adapter.

Waste Disposal

Toner cartridges:
Wherever possible, return used toner cartridges to the manufacturer for recycling. Don’t throw unwanted full cartridges into the office rubbish bin – they should be disposed of as hazardous waste. Take care when handling toner cartridges to minimise personal exposure to the contents.
Batteries:
Avoid putting used batteries into the rubbish bin. Collect batteries separately and arrange for appropriate environmentally safe disposal.

Common office chemicals, cleaning and household chemicals:
Always read the label for precautions and disposal instructions. Empty containers from most common office and household chemicals can be disposed of safely in the office rubbish bin. Make sure containers are empty and secure the lid before putting the container into the bin.

Aerosol cans:
Make sure aerosol cans are completely empty before putting them into the rubbish bin. If the aerosol can still contains gas, it has the potential to explode if it gets too hot, or the can could accidentally release flammable gases, creating a fire risk.

While the office environment probably has fewer significant hazards and the risks may seem far lower than that of factories and construction sites, office workers may be at greater risk of injury if they take safety for granted in their workplace. Being aware of potential hazards and following appropriate work practices will go a long way toward ensuring no one is hurt when they come to work in the office.