

Safety Considerations for Telecommuting

The COVID-19 pandemic and attempting to limit its spread in the workplace has created an unprecedented need for employees to work from home. The rush to get employees out of busy workplaces and into home offices made it impossible for many to do a proper workplace review prior to the employee working from home. Even so, employers and employees should work together to ensure home office hazards are minimized and workstations are as ergonomically sound as possible during this time. Below are some considerations for employee safety when telecommuting:

HAZARD ASSESSMENTS

An at home workplace hazard assessment should be conducted and documented. It's likely the employer will have to rely on the employee to identify and correct hazards identified. At a minimum, the employee should be provided with a basic checklist inspection form to complete and return to the employer. *Safety Benefits Inc. has a checklist for use when assessing home office hazards.*

HAZARDS TO ASSESS: Cords & Clutter

Trips and falls are one of the most common causes of injury for telecommuters. Cords and cables strewn across an office, doorways or entryways, increase the likelihood of trips and falls. Electrical cords and wires need to be placed to avoid tripping hazards. The use of power cord ties is an easy way to help control these hazards.

Clutter is another hazard that can lead to trip and fall injuries. Simple steps to promote organization and minimize chaos can make a home office safer. Telecommuters should consider having a designated location to place a water bottle or coffee cup to minimize the risk of spills; a trash can should be readily available to prevent buildup of clutter, etc.

HAZARD TO ASSESS: Ergonomics & Office Furniture

Workstation ergonomics (ensuring the workstation fits the employee) is always important. But given the speed with which so many employees have been relocated to home offices, it is crucial that employers stress the importance of a proper set up. What kind of chair and work surface are being used? Is the computer screen at a proper height? Is there proper lighting to avoid glare on the computer screen? Sitting on the couch hunched over a laptop, working on the computer while sitting on a bar stool at the kitchen island, sharing a small space at the kitchen table because other family members also need space to work— are all formulas for employees to experience back, neck and arm pain. *Safety Benefits Inc. has a checklist to use when assessing workstation ergonomics.*

When considering office furniture for a longer-term telecommuting assignment, the employer might want a policy or agreement specifying that the work area must be of an adequate size to accommodate equipment and supplies to be used. File cabinets, bookshelves and other furniture should not prevent safe exit from the work area in the event of an emergency.

HAZARD TO ASSESS: Electrical

A home office requires an adequate number of outlets. The capacity of the circuits should be adequate to accommodate needed office equipment. Outlets should be equipped with three-pronged ground configuration and equipment should be plugged into surge protectors. Employees need to be made aware that certain electrical components will require more ventilation than others to prevent overheating. All equipment used in the home office should have an Underwriter's Laboratory (UL) approval.

HAZARD TO ASSESS: Fire Safety

Most homes have fire safety equipment and a plan for safe exit in the event of a fire. However, it is still important to think about fire safety as it applies to a home office. A fire extinguisher should be immediately available, and the employee should understand how to properly use it. The work area should have a smoke detector and the employee might consider installing a carbon monoxide detector as well. Employers should discourage smoking in the home office as it can be a fire hazard and negatively impacts air quality of the workspace. Any coffee pots, space heaters or similar items used in the office should be located away from flammables and turned off when not in use. While sleeping areas are most likely included in any plan for emergency exit, a home office might be forgotten. It's a good idea to think about an effective emergency exit from a home office if it's in the basement.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROLS

Every employee assigned to work from home needs to know who to contact with questions or concerns. Employees concerned over workspace hazards should have a designated contact. This should be someone who can assist the employee in mitigating such hazards. If a work-related injury occurs it is important to follow established procedures. Employees need to know who to contact in the event of an injury, where to find forms for reporting the incident, what to do if first aid or medical treatment is needed, and what information may be needed for an investigation.

WORKERS COMPENSATION (SDML Workers Compensation Fund)

When an employee is assigned to telecommute, then the employee is covered the same as if he/she were working from the office. Keep in mind that telecommuting does have inherent grey areas - for an injury to be compensable the injury must: 1) be work related; and 2) the employment must be a major contributing cause of the injury.

The fact that an employee is working from home doesn't automatically make every activity he or she performs a *work-related* activity. If a telecommuting employee submits a First Report of Injury, a file will be set up and the claim investigated as in every other reported work injury. Compensability will be determined in the same method and manner as all claims submitted, which is based on the facts and merits of the specific situation and applicable laws.

Given current circumstances prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, most employers have not had an opportunity to thoroughly consider the recommendations listed in this article. When the effects and restrictions from this pandemic ease, a more complete hazard and ergonomic assessment should be conducted for any employee who will continue to work from a home office.

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