Safety Note #155
Home Office Safety

Photograph from by flickr user super-structure

With the increase in telecommuting more employees are opting to work from home. This is leading to the popularity of home offices, however it's tempting to do the minimum setup when working from home-put your computer on a dinette table and pull up a chair. Unfortunately, if your job requires long hours in front of computer screen, this can become a recipe for injury. If the main home-based work involves extensive computer use, it pays to organize your workspace to maximize comfort and efficiency.

First, place your computer on a standard-height desk or workstation, preferably one that's recommended for computers. Computer desks are designed to hold the monitor at the correct height, to maximize keyboarding comfort, and to hold peripheral devices efficiently (to avoid excess bending and stretching).

Second, choose a standard, five-legged office chair. These chairs minimize the risk of injury over time by encouraging good posture and back position. In addition, their stability decreases the likelihood of injury from falling over backward. A good computer chair has lumbar support, adjustable armrests, a slightly inclined backrest, a height-adjustable seat, and a high backrest or headrest. Also, be sure the chair fits you—try it out in the store before bringing it home.

Third, work in an area with proper lighting—bright enough to read your accompanying documents, but not more than 10 times brighter than the monitor. Avoid glare on the screen and accompanying documents; if necessary, add a glare filter to the monitor. If possible, work with at least some natural light, which many people beleive decreases eyestrain.

A home office should be as safe as a business office. The following guidelines will help reduce the risk for injury while working from home.

- Adjust temperature, noise, ventilation, and lighting levels to establish a comfortable work enviroment.
- All electrical equipment should be free of recognized hazards that would cause physical harm (frayed wires, bare conductors, loose wires, flexible wires running through walls, exposed wires to the ceiling).
- Ensure the home's electrical system permits the grounding of electrical equipment.
- Clear aisles, doorways, and corners of obstructions to permit visibility and movement.
- Arrange file cabinets and storage closets so drawers and doors do not open into walkways.
- Ensure the chair does not have loose casters (wheels) and that the rungs and legs firmly attached.
- Secure phone lines, electrical cords, and extension wires under a desk or alongside a baseboard.
- Keep floor surfaces clean, dry, level, and free of worn or frayed seams.
- Change your body position periodically throughout the day.
- Use a document stand to reduce the amount of neck twisting or bending forward if typing from a source document.
- Position your keyboard directly in front of you and at approximately elbow height. This should enable you to type with straight wrists.
- Rearrange the work area to avoid excess bending and stooping.
- Try to relax. Many injuries and physical pain arise from continuously tensing neck and shoulder muscles while working.

Portions of this Safety Note are excerpted from the American Industrial Hygiene Association document entitled "There's No Place Like Home…for Workplace Safety."