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display screen equipment

members' factcard

experts at work



DISPLAY SCREEN EQUIPMENT

This factcard is for members who work with display screen equipment. It provides:

- a summary of the law relating to DSE use
- good practice for laptop users
- advice on what to do if you think that working with display screen equipment is affecting your health
- action points for safety representatives.

DSE REGULATIONS

The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 were amended by the Health and Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2002. They protect workers by reducing the health risks of DSE work.

The regulations set general objectives for managing computer use, but all workstations used by the employer must meet the requirements in the schedule, which sets out minimum standards.

They apply to all employers but not everyone who uses DSE is covered by them. However, employers have general duties to protect all employees under other health and safety legislation.

Under the regulations, anything with an “alphanumeric or graphic display screen” is classed as DSE. This means that, as well as desktop computers, it covers laptops, tablets, smartphones and almost anything else with a screen in use for prolonged periods.

Health problems commonly associated with DSE work include:

- musculoskeletal disorders such as back pain or upper limb disorders – including pains in the neck, arms, elbows, wrists, hands or fingers
- eye strain and headaches
- fatigue and stress.

These problems can usually be prevented by training and good ergonomic design of equipment, workplace and job.

WHO IS A USER?

People covered by the regulations are called 'users'. A user is 'an employee who habitually uses display screen equipment as a significant part of their normal work.' The guidance notes to the regulations define staff as users if these criteria apply:

- normally use DSE for continuous spells of an hour or more
- use it more or less daily in this way
- have to transfer information quickly to or from screen
- need to apply high levels of attention or concentration
- are highly dependent on DSE or have little choice about using it
- need special training or skills to use the equipment.

Part-time workers should be assessed using the same criteria. Agency or temporary staff are likely to be covered by their agency and host employer. To save effort, employers can decide that all staff who use DSE will be treated as users.

WORKSTATIONS

Employers must ensure that workstations meet the minimum standards laid down in the schedule to the regulations. These relate to ergonomic features, design factors for furniture, hardware, software, accessories and workplace environment. They apply to both new and second-hand equipment.

Employers should also refer to other specific HSE guidance on seating and lighting.

RISK ASSESSMENTS

Employers must carry out a suitable and sufficient risk assessment of users' workstations to identify risks and reduce them 'to the lowest extent reasonably practicable' (Regulation 2).

The risk assessment should:

- be systematic and investigate non-obvious causes of problems
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- be appropriate (depending on duration, intensity and difficulty of work undertaken)
- be comprehensive – analysing the workstation (equipment, furniture, software and environment) – organisational and individual factors such as workloads, provision of breaks, special needs of individuals, eg those with a disability
- incorporate information from the employer and user
- include a check for desirable features as well as eliminating problems.

Employers must review the assessment when:

- major changes are made to the display screen equipment, furniture or software
- new users start work or change workstations
- workstations are re-sited (even if the equipment and furniture remain the same)
- major features of the work environment such as lighting are significantly modified
- the nature of the work changes considerably
- reports of ill-health are received.

If a workstation is used by more than one member of staff, it should be assessed in relation to everyone who is a 'user'. In most cases, assessments should be recorded and kept readily accessible, in electronic or hard copy form. If there is doubt whether an individual is a user, carrying out a risk assessment may clarify the position.

WHO SHOULD DO ASSESSMENTS?

Assessments are often carried out using checklists, completed by users or assessors who are trained by the employer. However, employers must ensure that employees receive the necessary training before they are asked to complete a checklist or assessment. Assessors should be familiar with the main requirements of the regulations and be able to:

- assess risks
 - draw on additional information
 - draw valid and reliable conclusions from information in the assessment
 - record the assessment and communicate findings as appropriate and to the worker concerned
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- recognise their own limitations and call for further expertise where necessary.

Checks should be made on in-house employees who are trained as assessors, to ensure they are competent.

DSE users should be encouraged to report ill-health problems as a useful check that control measures are working properly.

Problems identified in the assessments should be remedied as quickly as possible.

BREAKS

Employers must plan user activities so that their daily work on display screen equipment is periodically interrupted by breaks or changes of activity (Regulation 4).

To prevent health problems and to vary visual and mental demands, jobs should consist of screen and non screen-based work. Where the tasks cannot be so organised, the employer must introduce deliberate breaks or pauses into the work routine. How long the breaks should be is not specified, but the regulations advise:

- the timing of the break is more important than its length. Short frequent breaks are better than occasional, longer breaks
- individual control over work patterns is the ideal.

Breaks should:

- be taken before the onset of health problems
- be included in working time
- reduce the workload at the screen
- be taken away from the screen if possible and allow the user to stand up, change posture etc
- avoid similar use of arms and hands if the DSE work is intensive.

Breaks should not:

- be taken in order to recuperate
- result in a higher pace or intensity of work because of their introduction.

Software that monitors breaks is available. The employer must still ensure that the aid results in users

taking appropriate breaks and is not frustrating in the way it works.

EYESIGHT TESTS

Users, and those about to become users, can ask their employer to provide an eyesight test (Regulation 5).

Users are entitled to further eye tests at regular intervals after the first test, and in between if they have visual difficulties which they believe are caused by DSE work.

An appropriate sight test is defined by the Opticians Act as an examination conducted by a registered ophthalmic optician or a registered medical practitioner with suitable qualifications.

If tests indicate a need for glasses for DSE work, the employer will have to pay for a basic pair of frames and lenses. This may include employees who already wear spectacles or contact lenses as well as those who have uncorrected visual defects. There may be some situations where bifocal or varifocal lenses are appropriate. The optician can advise and the employer will be obliged to pay for any necessary lenses.

All users are entitled to ask for an eyesight test carried out by an optician – even if a vision screening test carried out by the employer on the premises shows that they do not require any correction to their eyesight for DSE work.

TRAINING AND INFORMATION

Employers are obliged to provide information and training on the health and safety aspects of working with DSE before a user begins work (Regulation 6).

These activities should take place in working time and cover:

- the risks from DSE work
 - the importance of good posture, changing position and good keyboard technique
 - avoiding awkward or repeated stretching
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- how to avoid reflections and glare on screen
- adjusting, cleaning and inspecting equipment to pick up defects requiring maintenance
- organising work for activity changes or breaks
- how to report and access help with problems or ill-health symptoms
- how staff can contribute to the risk assessment process
- correct use of equipment adjustment mechanisms
- information about rights to eyesight tests.

Training should be refreshed or updated if the hardware, software, workstation, environment or job are modified.

People absent from work for long periods – particularly if their ill-health is related to DSE work – may need special training or re-training as part of their rehabilitation.

USE OF POINTING DEVICES

Employers should consider the type of pointing device that will be most appropriate for the work (eg mouse, trackball, joystick etc.) Appendix 4 to the regulations gives guidance.

HSE advises users to:

- position the device within easy reach so that it can be used with the wrist straight
- sit upright and close to the desk so the arm is not stretched
- move the keyboard out of the way if not in use
- support the forearm on the desk and not grip too tightly, removing the hand from a device if not in use
- rest fingers lightly on the buttons
- take breaks from intensive work.

LAPTOP USERS

HSE advises that decisions on whether or not staff using laptops are users need to be made on

the same basis as if they were using non-portable equipment (Appendix 3).

The design features of laptops can make prolonged use uncomfortable unless steps are taken to avoid problems. Wherever possible the equipment should be on a firm surface at the right height for keying.

Some of the minimum requirements in the schedule to the regulations may not apply to laptops in prolonged use as the characteristics of the task may rule them out.

Laptop users should still:

- have their work properly assessed – including the risk of manual handling and violence outside the workplace
- be provided with training and information
- be advised about their rights to eyesight tests
- be given specific advice on the appropriate use of laptops.

Research from HSE on the use of laptops indicates that the following will help employers to reduce risks:

- select laptops for their ergonomic features rather than cost or prestige
 - look at the weight of equipment (3kg or less) with accessories as few and lightweight as possible
 - choose equipment with as large and clear a screen as possible, which should be detachable or height-adjustable
 - specify as long a battery life as possible and provide extra transformer/cable sets in main locations, so users only have to carry the computer
 - avoid manufacturer-branded cases and provide a lightweight carrying case with handle and shoulderstraps
 - look for tilt-adjustable keyboards
 - treat docking stations as full-sized DSE in relation to their minimum standards.
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Employers should:

- provide guidance on setting up and using a docking station, and on using a laptop when a docking station is not available
- ensure that laptops are only used when out of the office or with a docking station
- provide external keyboards and monitors or full docking stations where laptops will be in prolonged use
- provide training on manual-handling for users of laptops and if necessary carry out a manual-handling risk assessment
- consider the provision of backpacks or wheeled luggage carriers
- arrange breaks and changes of activity – particularly important for laptop users.

Where relevant, employers should instruct staff, especially lone workers, on how to minimise and avoid:

- risks of theft and mugging
- the weight of laptops and accessories
- their use in non-ideal locations such as cars
- carrying unnecessary equipment or papers.

Tablet and smartphone users

Smartphones, tablets and other internet-enabled devices can cause similar issues to desktop computers, forcing people to adopt uncomfortable postures and repetitive movements. Frequent use has been linked to tendonitis – inflammation or irritation of a tendon – in the thumb or fingers.

Tablets and smartphones are covered by the DSE Regulations. As with laptops, deciding whether those who use these devices are users should be made on the same basis as if they were using non-portable devices.

Most people are unlikely to operate tablets and smartphones for extended periods, meaning that most will not be classed as users. However, employers should take sensible steps to ensure that using these devices does not put employees' health at risk.

HOMEWORKERS

If an employee is a user then all the regulations apply to them, whether their workstation is at home or on the employer's premises.

Homeworkers encounter the normal risks associated with DSE work and, potentially, increased risks from social isolation, stress, lack of supervision or employer commitment, and difficulties in undertaking a risk assessment.

HSE guidance says employers can train homeworkers to undertake their own risk assessment using an ergonomic checklist. The assessment will need to cover any need for specific training and information to compensate for the absence of direct day-to-day supervision.

It is particularly important that homeworkers understand their employer's protocols for seeking advice on ergonomic defects or warning signs of health problems.

EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES

The needs of individual employees with disabilities should take priority over rigid compliance with the regulations. Employers are required to make reasonable adjustments where staff are covered by the Equality Act 2010. The disabled user will be the best source of practical knowledge in relation to adjustments that may be required.

The Health and Safety Executive has produced specific guidance for employers and employees on health and safety for disabled people, which include checklists and case studies. The guidance is available from www.hse.gov.uk/disability.

REPORTING PROBLEMS

Action to take for health problems related to DSE:

- enter the symptoms/injury in the accident book, even if the condition does not seem serious at the time. Employers should encourage early reporting and establish a supportive climate in the workplace
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that emphasises the benefits of early detection of possible harm

- report the symptoms to your supervisor or line manager and copy the report to your Prospect safety representative. Employers should provide appropriate advice for users who report symptoms
- keep a personal record of your employer's response, including action agreed and taken
- visit your GP to get the condition investigated. Try to ensure your doctor is aware of your work tasks and why they may be responsible for your discomfort. It is good practice for employers to help employees obtain the treatment they need
- follow your doctor's advice and keep your employer informed in writing about the advice given. This may include changing your duties away from keyboard duties
- seek further medical advice if your GP is sceptical or unsympathetic
- if symptoms continue, you may need to contact Prospect for help in claiming legal compensation or state benefits. Do not engage your own solicitor as this will exclude you from the Prospect scheme.

CONSULTATION

Your employer is legally obliged to consult accredited safety representatives on:

- the provision of training
- the introduction of new technology
- the risk assessment process.

ACTION BY SAFETY REPS

Safety reps should:

- ensure they have access to the regulations
 - review how employers are carrying out their legal obligations under the regulations
 - ensure that employees can easily report any problems with their use of DSE or health
 - monitor DSE and prevention strategies at safety committee meetings; one or more cases of a
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particular health problem indicates that an employer should review assessments and control measures

- check that laptop users, part-timers, homeworkers and temps are covered as appropriate.

CONTACTS

- **Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance**
<http://arma.uk.net/>
- **AbilityNet**
0800 269 545
enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk
www.abilitynet.org.uk

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- www.hse.gov.uk/msd/index.htm
- Working with display screen equipment (DSE), a brief guide: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg36.pdf
- <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/l26.htm>
- DSE workstation checklist: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/ck1.pdf
- To order **HSE publications** contact HSE Books:
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