

Office Safety

University Facilities (UF)

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This document establishes official Guideline for safety while working in an office space.

General Office Safety

A large percentage of workplace accidents and injuries occur in offices. Like the shop or laboratory, the office requires preventive measures to ensure a safe and healthful environment. Common causes of office accidents include the following:

- Slipping, tripping, and falling hazards
- Burning, cutting, and pinching hazards
- Improper lifting and handling techniques
- Failure to remain attentive
- Improper office layout and arrangement
- Dangerous electrical wiring
- Exposure to toxic substances
- Horseplay

Purpose and Scope

- Depending on the office situation and hazards involved, specific training may be needed on chemical hazards, machine guarding, ergonomics, etc. For more information on training requirements and methods, contact your supervisor or Safety and Environmental Health.
- The following sections address several office safety practices. Other preventive measures not mentioned here may also be necessary.

Good Housekeeping Practices

Many office accidents are caused by insufficient housekeeping practices. By keeping the office floor both neat and clean, you can eliminate most slipping, tripping, and falling hazards. Other good housekeeping practices include the following:

- Ensure that office lighting is adequate. Replace burned out light bulbs and have additional lighting installed, as necessary.
- Ensure that electrical cords and phone cords do not cross walkways or otherwise pose a tripping hazard. If you cannot move a cord, have a new outlet installed or secure the cord to the floor with cord covering strips. Do not run cords underneath carpet, and avoid the use of tape whenever possible.
- Report or repair tripping hazards such as defective tiles, boards, or carpet immediately.
- Clean spills and pick up fallen debris immediately. Even simple items such as a loose pencil could cause a serious falling injury.
- Keep office equipment, facilities, and machines in good condition.
- Store items in an approved storage space. Take care to not stack boxes too high or too tight. Clearly label boxes with their contents.
- Keep all drawers and cupboard doors closed when unattended.

Chemical Hazards

Many common office chemicals can cause injuries if improperly used, stored, or disposed. Some common office chemicals include: cleaning agents, glues, correction fluid, inks, and toners. To guarantee the safe use, storage, and disposal of the chemicals in your office, always review the Safety Data Sheet (SDS) and/or container label for important information.

Cuts and Punctures

Cuts and punctures happen when people use everyday office supplies without exercising care. Follow these guidelines to help reduce the chance for cuts and punctures:

- When sealing envelopes, use a liquid dispenser, not your tongue.
- Be careful when using kitchen knives, scissors, staplers, letter openers, and box openers. Any of these items could cause a serious injury.

- Avoid picking up broken glass with your bare hands. Wear gloves and use a broom and a dust pan.
- Place used blades, broken glass, or other sharp objects in a rigid container, such as a box, and take to the Facilities Safety Manager or Research Safety Office for proper safe disposal.

Machine Accidents

Only use machines that you know how to operate. Never attempt to operate an unfamiliar machine without reading the machine instructions or receiving directions from a qualified person. In addition, follow these guidelines to ensure machine safety:

- Secure machines that tend to unexpectedly move during operation.
- Do not place machines near the edge of a table or desk.
- Ensure that machines with moving parts are guarded to prevent accidents. Do not remove these guards.
- Unplug defective machines, place "Out of Order" signs on them, and have them repaired immediately.
- Do not use any machine that smokes, sparks, shocks, or appears defective.
- Close hand-operated paper cutters after each use.
- Take care when working with copying machines. If you have to open the machine for maintenance, repair, or troubleshooting, remember that some parts may be hot. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions for troubleshooting.
- Unplug paper shredders before conducting maintenance, repair, or troubleshooting.

Some items can be very dangerous when worn around machinery with moving parts. Avoid wearing the following items around machines with moving parts:

- Loose belts
- Jewelry
- Long, loose hair
- Long, loose sleeves or pants
- Scarves
- Ties

Slips, Trips, and Falls

The easiest way to avoid slips, trips, and falls is to pay attention to your surroundings and to avoid running or rushing. Additionally, you can improve the flow of office traffic by following these guidelines:

- Arrange office furnishings in a manner that provides unobstructed areas for movement.
- Keep stairs, steps, flooring, and carpeting well maintained.
- Ensure that glass doors have some type of marking to keep people from walking through, or into, them.
- Clearly mark any difference in floor level that could cause an accident.
- Secure throw rugs and mats.
- Do not place wastebaskets or other objects in walkways.
- Close file drawers when you leave the cabinet.

Preventing Stress

To reduce stress and prevent fatigue, it is important to take mini-breaks (not many breaks) throughout the day. If possible, change tasks at least once every two hours. Stretch your arms, neck, and legs often if you do the same type of work for long periods of time. Rest your eyes often by closing them or looking at something other than the work at hand. For a quick pick-me-up, breathe deeply several times by inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. In addition, try eating your lunch somewhere other than at your desk.

Other examples of stress-relieving exercises that can be done at your desk include the following:

- Head and Neck Stretch:
 - Slowly turn your head to the left and hold it for three seconds. Slowly turn your head to the right and hold it for three seconds. Drop your chin gently towards your chest, and then tilt it back as far as you can. Repeat these steps five to ten times.
- Shoulder Roll:
 - Roll your shoulders forward and then backward using a circular motion.
- Upper Back Stretch:
 - Grasp one arm below the elbow and pull gently towards the other shoulder. Hold this position for five seconds and then repeat with the other arm.
- Wrist Wave:
 - With your arms extended in front of you, raise and lower your hands several times.
- Finger Stretch:

- Make fists with your hands and hold tight for one second, then spread your fingers wide for five seconds.

Equipment Safety

Common office machines, such as the following, require special safety considerations: copiers, microwaves, adding machines, typewriters, and computers. Be sure you know how to operate these machines before using them, and never use one of these machines if you think it is defective. Other office equipment that requires safety consideration includes furniture such as file cabinets, shelves, desks, chairs, ladders, and step stools.

File Cabinets and Shelves

Because file cabinets and shelves tend to support heavy loads, treat them with special care. Follow these safety guidelines for file cabinets:

- Secure file cabinets that are not weighted at the bottom.
- Ensure that file cabinet drawers cannot easily be pulled clear of the cabinet.
- Do not block room ventilation grates with file cabinets.
- Open only one drawer at a time to keep the cabinet from toppling.
- Close drawers when they are not in use.
- Do not place heavy objects on top of cabinets. Be aware that anything on top of a cabinet may fall off if a drawer is opened suddenly.
- Close drawers slowly using the handle to avoid pinched fingers.
- Keep the bottom drawer full. This will help stabilize the entire cabinet.

In addition, follow these safety guidelines for office shelves:

- Ensure shelves are secured.
- Place heavy objects on the bottom shelves. This will keep the entire structure more stable.
- Maintain 18 inches between top shelf items and the plane of the fire suppression sprinkler heads. In non-sprinkler areas, 24 inches must be maintained from top shelf items and the ceiling.
- Do not block room ventilation grates with shelves.
- Never climb on shelves (even lower shelves). Use an approved ladder or step stool.

Desks

Follow these safety guidelines for office desks:

- Keep desks in good condition (i.e., free from sharp edges, nails, etc.)
- Ensure that desks do not block exits or passageways.

- Ensure that glass-top desks do not have sharp edges.
- Ensure that desks with spring-loaded tables function properly. The table should not spring forth with enough force to cause an injury.
- Do not climb on desks. Use an approved ladder or step stool.
- Keep desk drawers closed when not in use.
- Repair or report any desk damage that could be hazardous.

Chairs

Safety guidelines for office chairs include the following:

- Do not lean back in office chairs, particularly swivel chairs with rollers.
- Never climb on a chair. Use an approved ladder or step stool.
- Office desk chairs should have adjustable back supports and seat height. Make sure that your chair's back support position and seat height are comfortable.
- Take care when sitting in a chair with rollers. Make sure it does not roll out from under you when you sit down.
- Repair or report any chair damage that could be hazardous.
- Do not roll chairs over electrical cords.

Ladders and Step stools

Always use an approved ladder or step stool to reach any item above your extended arm height. Never use a makeshift device, such as a desktop, file cabinet, bookshelf, chair or box, as a substitute for a ladder or step stool. Follow these guidelines when using ladders/step stools:

- Do not load ladders or step stools above their intended capacity.
- Place ladders or step stools on slip-free surfaces even if they have slip-resistant feet.
- Avoid placing ladders or step stools in walkways, and never place them in front of a door, unless the door is locked and barricaded.
- Refer to the Industrial Safety section in this manual for more information on ladder safety.

Ergonomics and Work Station Arrangements

Ergonomics involves adjusting work processes or stations to fit a particular employee. Improper ergonomic design can cause debilitating long-term musculoskeletal effects. Suggestions for maintaining an ergonomic work atmosphere:

- Stay in good physical condition.
- Take "mini" breaks and stretch intermittently in both sitting and standing positions.
- Change tasks frequently

- Adjust your computer screen to limit glare and take frequent vision breaks away from your computer to allow your eyes to fully relax. Periodically gazing across the room or out a window will help the eye muscles rest and receive oxygenated blood.
- Keep items frequently used in close proximity to you.
- Maintain good posture and use a chair with adequate support to adjust your upper extremities to a neutral position.
- Be aware of cumulative trauma disorder warning signs such as tingling, numbness or burning pain in fingers, hands, arms, wrists and shoulders.
- Report any symptoms to your supervisor.

Space Heaters

The use of portable electric space heaters should always be a last resort. If your workspace is too cold, your first action should always be to report the problem to the Facilities Department.

When necessary, the use of portable electric space heaters is allowed in University buildings. When used improperly though, space heaters are an accident waiting to happen. They can cause fires, electric shocks, and can reduce oxygen levels. Fuel fired space heaters (e.g., natural gas, kerosene, propane, fuel oil, etc.) are prohibited in office settings. The following apply when using portable electric space heaters:

- Use only for the purpose for which they are designed (refer to manufacturer's labeling and recommendations)
- The heater must be Underwriters Laboratory or Factory Mutual approved.
- The space heater must have devices that automatically turn it off if tipped over and when the room is warmed.
- Keep the heater in a stable, upright position with at least 30 inches of space between the front of the unit and any other surface.
- Never operate the heater in a closed area, such as beneath furniture, in cabinets, beneath/behind curtains, drapes, or other combustibles (i.e., paper, cardboard, etc.). Never hang a portable heater from a wall or ceiling unless it has been specifically designed for that type of installation.
- Check the cord to make sure it is not frayed or worn.
- If an extension cord is needed, use only one that is rated to handle the heater's electrical load.
- Always unplug heaters when they are not in use.
- Do not overload electrical circuits.
- Never touch an electric heater if your hands are wet or if you are in contact with water.