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Ergonomics: Safety or Wellness Issue

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Ergonomics – Is It A Safety or Wellness Issue?
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Introduction
The answer, if you are using a comprehensive employee health and productivity model, is that it really doesn’t matter. Either way, ergonomic injuries are costing your organization both directly as medical costs and indirectly as lost productivity costs. What is ergonomics? Simply put, ergonomics is the science of matching the work environment with the individual characteristics and capabilities of the worker.

Types of Risks
Both manufacturing and non-manufacturing type employers face ergonomic risks. Ergonomic injuries are probably the greatest risk faced by a non-manufacturing type employer. Within an office type setting, the biggest ergonomic risk comes from computer use. Industrial type ergonomic risks include working in an awkward position and repetitive movements, including shoveling and raking.

Computer Use
Risks arising from computer use generally arise from poor body position in relationship to the height of the chair, keyboard, mouse and monitor. Secondary is the risk from uninterrupted, repetitive key strokes. Employees permanently assigned to a workstation should undergo a workstation evaluation. If multiple employees use one workstation, the workstation should be fully adjustable.

If having a physical/occupational therapist or ergonomics specialist evaluate your workstations is not feasible for financial reasons, consider training one or two of your employees as “peer evaluators.” Employee self evaluation tools and resources can also be found on the Web, though I would caution the reader that self evaluation should, in my opinion, be a last resort. Some examples of available resources include:
State of Wisconsin – http://www.doa.state.wi.us/ergonomics/course/f_lesson04.html

In addition to workstation evaluations, a comprehensive approach to ergonomic injury prevention includes stretching and education. Employees should be mandated or encouraged to participate in group stretch breaks at regularly scheduled times during their workday. Employers should also encourage employees to take quick mini-breaks every hour. For every 60 minutes of computer use, employees should take a 3 minute mini-break and get up and stretch or take a quick walk around their immediate office area.

Employees can reduce their risks by being better educated and aware of ergonomic risks. The training can be accomplished either in a classroom setting or electronically via interactive CD-ROM or on the Web.
Laptops
If employees are issued a laptop to work from home or other off site location on a regular basis, consider supplying the employee with an external keyboard, mouse and monitor. Laptops are not designed for extended use at a fixed location. Ideally, the home office or other regularly used off site location should also receive a workstation type evaluation.

Role of the Supervisor
Ergonomics should be a part of the everyday language of the supervisor. To promote an ergonomically healthy workplace, supervisors should:

- Learn the ergonomic risk factors for the jobs in their unit and how these risk factors can be minimized
- Supply ergonomic training to their employees
- Encourage employee input into solving ergonomic related issues and problems
- Designate a peer evaluator for their work unit and then support the person by providing the necessary time and resources
- Secure ergonomic appropriate furniture and tools for their employees
- Promote periodic scheduled stretch breaks and frequent, short mini-breaks as well as alternative work activities when necessary
- Encourage staff to report pain and discomfort symptoms early

Remember, it is always more cost effective and morale boosting to identify and proactively address areas of high risk before an injury results. Injuries are costly and demoralizing.

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