

# Office Safety Pocket Guide

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**The *Office Safety Pocket Guide* is  
available with your organization's  
name imprinted on the cover.**

*Office Safety Pocket Guide*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

My name is Marissa and I'm the office manager for this manufacturing firm. In the ten years that I've been here, I can't remember anyone getting hurt on the job, but the last three weeks have been a nightmare! The people in this office building have experienced two fires, one back injury, one broken ankle, two minor automobile accidents, and a hand laceration that required six stitches.

You'll have to excuse the appearance of this particular office. Maintenance hasn't quite finished cleaning up after the fire we had here yesterday. The investigators think the blaze started in Dora's overstuffed desk drawer. I never would have guessed that this was a hazard, but they explained that as Dora jammed papers and manuals in and out, the friction caused a book of matches buried at the bottom of the drawer to ignite. Thank goodness no one was badly hurt, although a couple of our co-workers were sent to the hospital for smoke inhalation.

Fires pose a serious threat to office workers. In

## **I. OFFICE FIRE SAFETY**

Who can forget the movie, “The Towering Inferno,” Hollywood’s depiction of the ultimate office fire? Yet modern office designs could make fiction a frightening reality. Today’s trend toward “open” offices invites a major fire disaster like the one conjured up on the big screen. Without doors to stop the spread of flames, a fire will flash through a whole floor within seconds, and consume an entire structure in minutes. In fact, the popular skyscraper constructions of many office buildings render firefighters’ hoses and ladders pretty useless.

The best way to stop office fires is to take steps to prevent them *before* they happen. Let’s visit the office across the hall to help prove my point.

### **1. Paper**

Here, the employees seem oblivious to the accumulation of paper on top of desks, shelves, and even on window sills. Like most office workers, they’ve accepted paperwork as a fact of life.

However, stacks of paper present a serious fire hazard if inadvertently piled next to radiators and portable heaters. When exposed to warm temperatures, paper can unknowingly smolder for hours before bursting into flames.

Eliminating as much paper clutter as possible from your work space is a primary defense against office fires fueled by paper. Set aside a few minutes every day to file away important documents and toss unneeded correspondence into the wastebasket. Clear your desk at the end of each workday.

### **2. Boxes**

Boxes are also easily combustible. If they must be stored in your office, stack them away from heat sources. Never pile boxes higher than

## **II. ELECTRICAL SHOCK**

Have you ever pounded out a letter on a manual typewriter? It gives you quite an appreciation for computers, doesn't it? But familiarity with hi-tech office equipment can make you very complacent about electricity.

The overwhelming potential of electricity is easily recognized during a severe thunderstorm. Coming in contact with the electricity that powers your computer or copy machine can result in an injury as serious as being struck by lightning.

Electrical energy, which flows through the circuitry of office equipment, is measured in amperes. You can be electrocuted by just a *fraction* of an ampere. A lethal electrical shock will cause your heart to beat erratically. When this happens, death is imminent.

For safety's sake, everyone in your office needs to develop a respect for electricity. Here are some ways to avoid being shocked when working with typewriters, computers, and copy machines:

### **Proper Care and Use of Office Equipment**

- Always unplug electrical equipment before opening the cover to clean or repair.
- If you find a cord unplugged or an electrical circuit turned off, don't assume that it should be turned on or plugged in. There may be a reason that it was left in this condition. Simply turning the power back on without checking into the situation may damage the equipment, start a fire, or even seriously injure someone.
- If you want to shut off the power to your equipment, use the "on-off" switch rather than pulling the cord from the wall receptacle. Tugging on the cord several times a day over a period of months may damage the cord and expose you to the risk of electrical shock.

### **III. PHYSICAL HAZARDS**

Let's get away from this mess and visit the offices on the second floor.

#### **1. Stairway Safety**

Always use handrails on stairways to prevent slips, trips, and falls. Stumbling on the stairs can result in a broken arm or leg, a typical work-related injury. When you're late for an important meeting, don't run up and down or skip stairs. You'll miss the meeting by more than a few minutes if you detour via the hospital emergency room to have a broken bone treated! And reading while climbing a staircase is akin to walking a tightrope without a net. You're just asking for trouble when you don't watch your step.

#### **2. Corridor Caution**

The office at the top of the stairs belongs to our general manager. Just yesterday, my co-worker Helen collided with him at this corridor intersection. Helen survived the mishap, and the boss, fortunately, only injured his pride. (But I really think Helen should put off her raise request for a few weeks.)

Hallway collisions are a prime cause of broken bones, bruises, and twisted ankles among office workers. At corridor intersections, slow down and use caution. If a convex mirror has been installed where two hallways cross, take a few seconds to glance at it to be sure you have a clear path.

Walk gingerly on freshly waxed corridor floors. And spilled coffee trails can also turn uncarpeted corridor floors into skating rinks.

#### **3. Drawer Danger**

Right next door is Fred's office. He's not here today because he's nursing a broken bone. If you recall, Fred tripped over the desk drawer

## **IV. BACK INJURIES**

Ninety percent of the population experiences back pain at some point in time, and a significant number of people suffer chronic back pain.

Injuries to the lower back are most common. Doctors categorize lower back pain as either primary or secondary. Primary pain results from injury to the soft tissue surrounding the spine; secondary pain comes from damaged spinal nerves.

In 1992, the National Safety Council estimated that 400,000 U.S. workers suffered disabling work-related back injuries that cost industry \$7 billion in worker compensation claims.

Office employees who spend long hours in the same position are prime candidates for chronic back pain. Here are a few tips on how to combat on-the-job back strain:

### **1. Desk Chair Adjustment**

- Adjust your desk chair to support and encourage the natural curvature of your spine.
- If offered a choice of desk chairs, choose one that has a concave seat and slightly rounded edges. This configuration tilts your pelvis forward and eases the stress on your lower body.
- Improper chair height restricts the blood circulation to your back, legs, and feet. While seated, adjust the chair height so the entire sole of your foot is resting squarely on the floor or on a footrest. Chair height is also correct when your bent knee is positioned slightly higher than the seat of your chair.
- The backrest of your chair should support both your upper and lower back.

## **V. HEALTH HAZARDS**

No matter how much satisfaction we derive from our jobs, all of us dream about our retirement years once in a while. Just imagine - no deadlines; no pressures; every day's a Saturday! But if you take risks with your health at the office, you may not live to enjoy tomorrow. As I mentioned earlier, being exposed to precarious situations in the workplace may not make you ill immediately, but can cause you harm many years from now.

When it comes to your physical well-being, you can't afford to kick back in your chair and rest your feet on the desk. Besides the danger of tipping over, a relaxed attitude toward office health hazards can only get you into trouble.

### **1. Room Ventilation**

In many offices, gone are the days when we could throw open the windows and let in some fresh air. Many modern buildings have sealed windows and are heated or cooled by ventilation systems that recirculate indoor air.

These self-contained systems can threaten the air employees breathe at work. For example, when cigarette smoking is permitted in areas that are not ventilated to the outside, dangerous by-products from second-hand smoke contaminate indoor air. Air quality experts who have sampled office atmospheres where cigarette smoking is permitted have identified 3,000 different chemicals. By breathing the air in a smoke-filled office, workers are inhaling deadly chemicals such as ammonia, benzene, formaldehyde, methane, and carbon monoxide. Cigarette smoke also picks up particulate matter from the surrounding environment and may contain asbestos fibers and fiberglass dust.

Despite the proven carcinogenic dangers of

## **VI. STRESS PREVENTION**

### **1. Physical Stress**

How did we ever manage without computers? Technology has certainly improved the efficiency of modern office workers. However, sitting at a desk five days a week, eight or more hours a day, is sometimes more physically taxing than manual labor. There are several bodily risks associated with prolonged computer use:

- a. Fatigue** - Because of the sedentary nature of computer tasks, employees who work at video display terminals (VDT's) complain about fatigue. Lack of exertion during the day can make you feel listless and achy simply because the human body was designed for movement. Sitting too long can also cause back and neck pain or circulation problems with your legs.

There are several ways to energize yourself when confined to working at your desk:

- Proper sitting posture is an essential part of overcoming fatigue. Unfortunately, most office chairs are not designed for comfort and don't offer enough options for adjustment to suit different types of body frames. But no matter what kind of chair you use, it's important to keep your neck, back, and spine in a straight line. When writing, don't hunch your shoulders over; bend forward from the hips. If you don't have a foot rest, use a couple of telephone books to elevate your legs. Raising your knees above your hips will improve circulation and take the strain off your back.

## **VII. FIRST AID**

Unfortunately, an awareness of office safety hazards can't totally eliminate accidents and injuries in the workplace. No matter how careful we are, mishaps do happen. In a single year, over 1 million workers suffer on-the-job injuries for a variety of reasons. Therefore, every employee should know how to respond to emergencies.

The first action to take if someone is injured is to call for professional help. Then, while you wait for the paramedics or emergency personnel to arrive, begin administering first aid. Your quick thinking can mean the difference between life and death to an injured co-worker.

First aid for a life-threatening injury or illness is simply a case of knowing your ABC's. This booklet simply defines the ABC's. To learn first aid or Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) skills, check with your employer or your local chapter of the American Red Cross for information on available training courses.

Look for the ABC's when assisting a co-worker whose life has been threatened by an accident or illness:

**A**irway - Is the victim's windpipe (trachea) blocked by a foreign object? The airway must be cleared by pulling the object out if it's visible, or performing abdominal thrusts (Heimlich Maneuver) to expel the lodged matter.

**B**reathing - Is the victim breathing? If not, artificial ventilation (mouth-to-mouth resuscitation) must be applied.

**C**irculation - Is the victim's heart beating? If there is no pulse, Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) must be initiated immediately by a trained person. Is the victim bleeding profusely? Bleeding can

## **VIII. PARKING LOT AND VEHICLE SAFETY**

### **1. Exiting the Building**

Looks like it's time to go home. Let's head to the parking lot to talk about worker safety outside the building. Accidents are just as likely to occur there as they are in your office.

Watch your step on your way out the door. At quitting time, walk, don't run, to your car. Haste can cause a fall. (Your boss may also question your dedication if he or she sees you rushing home every evening.)

Be especially careful when walkways are covered with ice and snow. In the wintertime, always wear proper footwear and shuffle in small steps along slippery asphalt or concrete surfaces.

### **2. Parking Lot Etiquette**

The company parking lot can be perilous at rush hour. When you hop into your car to go home, be wary of co-workers walking in the roadway. Don't back up unless absolutely necessary, and only when you're sure of a clear path behind you. In the wintertime, crusted snow and ice on your car can obstruct your view. Failure to thoroughly scrape your windshield is like driving with your eyes half-closed.

When pulling your car into the roadway, be aware that vans or pick-up trucks parked at the end of an aisle can also block your visibility. Never drive blindly into any intersection.

Always cruise slowly through the lot and never drive diagonally across parking lines to beat the traffic. Be on the look-out for other vehicles backing out at the same time.

### **3. Traveling for the Company**

Some office employees' positions involve occasional travel. If you are required to

## **CONCLUSION**

Remember how your mother always cautioned you to look both ways before crossing the street? If you were like most kids, you probably stopped listening after the third or fourth warning.

Of course, when you're finished with this booklet, you might be tempted to toss it aside and ignore my advice, too. Many adults also turn a deaf ear to safety advice because they've fooled themselves into believing that "it won't happen to me."

In our building, my co-workers and I have learned about safe working practices the hard way - through a series of misfortunes. I hope that you haven't had similar experiences, but what happened here can also happen in your workplace.

I'm not trying to scare you. The warnings in this guide aren't meant to instill fear. I've simply shared these experiences so that you and your co-workers can benefit from our mistakes. Once you recognize that potential risks and hazards exist in your workplace, you can eliminate, minimize, or control their effects, leaving you unafraid to meet the challenges of your job.

Well, it's time to hit the road and fight that rush hour traffic. This booklet offers a lot of valuable strategies for coping with day-to-day life in and out of your office. Keep it handy as a reference, and keep in mind that safety precautions don't end when you leave your office building at night. Your employer and co-workers want to see your smiling face again in the morning, so drive . . . or ride . . . safely.

**OFFICE SAFETY QUIZ  
HOW SAFE ARE YOU?**

1. Do you know where the closest fire extinguisher to your work area is, without looking or asking someone else?

YES or NO

2. Using a pressurized water extinguisher on fires other than wood and paper can cause the blaze to spread, and in some cases, cause severe physical damage to the person handling it.

TRUE or FALSE

3. Safety records indicate that the most common type of injuries on-the-job are:

- A. Burns from spilled coffee.
- B. Back strains and sprains.
- C. Motor vehicle accidents.
- D. Fractured fingers.

4. Carpal tunnel syndrome is:

- A. Fatigue from driving the tunnel between New York and New Jersey.
- B. Pain associated with jogging.
- C. It doesn't matter because it can't be prevented.
- D. An injury to the wrists and hands of office workers who type or use a computer.

5. Who is responsible for your safety?

- A. The boss.
- B. The janitor.
- C. Your lawyer.
- D. Yourself.

6. The accumulation of paper and other combustibles next to steam heaters can't ignite because the pipes aren't hot enough.

TRUE or FALSE

## **Answers**

- 1.** If you answered **YES**, score 10 points. Fire extinguishers should be located no more than 75 feet from your work area. The area should also be unobstructed so that there is free access to the device in case of fire.

A NO answer to this question earns you 0 points. Take some time to locate the fire extinguisher nearest to your office. It may save your life . . . and your job. Not many people find employment in burned-out buildings.
- 2.** Score 10 points if you answered **TRUE**. Using a pressurized water fire extinguisher on a liquid fire, such as an oil fire, can cause the flames to rapidly spread from the point of origin, placing the operator in serious danger. Using a water fire extinguisher on electrical equipment can result in shock to the operator.

If you answered **FALSE**, score 0 and ask your boss for fire extinguisher training.
- 3.** The correct answer is **(B)**, back strains and sprains. Give yourself 10 points for choosing the right answer, or subtract 5 points for an incorrect response.
- 4.** Carpal tunnel syndrome is a repetitive stress injury caused by constant wrist motion. The effects of this injury can be greatly minimized by applying the suggestions offered earlier in this guide.

If your answer was **(D)**, score 10 points. If you chose **(A)**, subtract 5 points from your total. Reread this booklet if you answered **(B)** or **(C)**.
- 5.** Score 10 points if you chose **(D)**. Answers **(A)**, **(B)**, and **(C)** earn you nothing. Although you might believe

## **GLOSSARY IN TERMS OF SAFETY**

**Acoustics.** The quality of sound in an environment. Offices with poor acoustics can be noisy. Safety statistics indicate that when workers are continually exposed to high noise levels, they will ultimately suffer significant hearing loss.

**Adrenaline.** A hormone in your body that is released during times of stress. Adrenaline, which is part of the “fight or flight” response, speeds up respiration and heart rate.

**Alcoholism.** A disease characterized by the excessive use of alcohol. Because alcohol reduces awareness, employees who drink to excess on-the-job place themselves and their co-workers in danger.

**Ampere.** The measure of electrical current flowing through a wire. Less than one ampere of electricity can kill a human being.

**Anxiety.** The feeling that something foreboding is about to happen. In today’s uncertain business environment, many office workers have become anxious about the future. Developing your sense of humor is an effective weapon against anxiety.

**Asbestos.** A fireproof mineral once used in the manufacture of building materials and heating systems. Many office complexes built twenty-five to thirty years ago probably contain asbestos. Asbestos is not considered a health hazard unless it becomes airborne.

**Automatic sprinkler system.** A safety device, located in the ceiling of your office, that is activated by the heat of a fire. When engaged, automatic sprinkler heads will emit a spray of water to extinguish flames.

**Blood alcohol content (BAC).** The percentage of alcohol circulating in the bloodstream. According to National Safety Council statistics, a driver with a BAC of .10 is