

dried out. "It's that unexpected wetness [that] kind of throws people," he says.

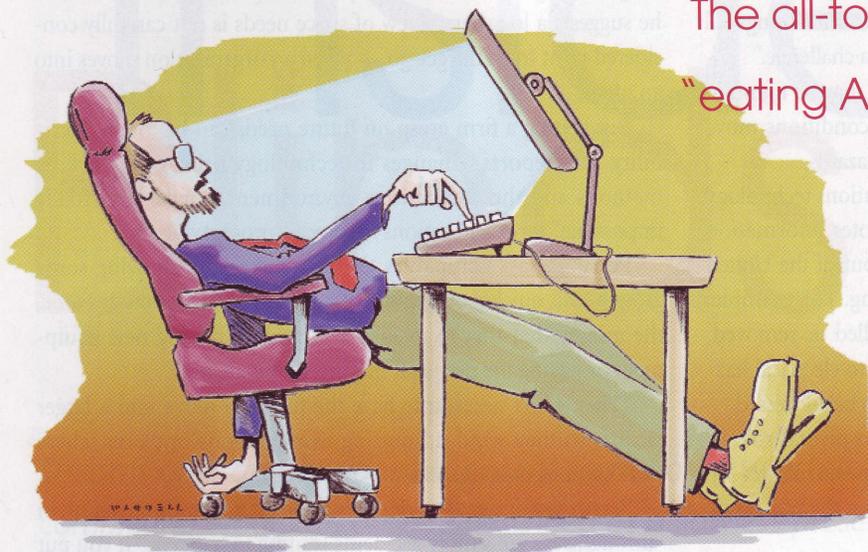
Weather, however, is hardly the only thing that can slip up office workers. Many such environments also have kitchen or coffee areas, Perruzza points out. "So, someone spills some coffee because they're in a rush, and then the next person... slips on the coffee, and there you go," he says.

Perruzza's advice to avoid a fall? Forego hard-leather or wooden-heeled shoes at the office and stick with non-slip footwear.

for several things. One main concern is ensuring the keyboard and mouse are at the correct height and position, Godkin says.

"Overuse of the mouse at the wrong height and position is the number one cause of office ergonomic injuries today," he reports. Resulting conditions can take the form of tingling fingers, carpal tunnel syndrome, golfer's/tennis elbow, rotator cuff problems, strained neck muscles, and frequent headaches in the temple area.

Another ongoing concern, says Godkin, is not having a height-adjustable keyboard tray wide enough to hold both the keyboard



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and the mouse. "Adjustability is the key when it comes to an office work station; a work station should have a fully adjustable chair and keyboard tray," he says.

Employers should have an ergonomics assessment completed for every employee who does computer work at a desk for more than four hours a day and who has reported some pain, Godkin contends.

Feeling comfy?

With footwear, protective steps can be taken, literally. But figurative steps can help minimize or prevent a host of other office hazards. One persistent issue has been ergonomics.

In a nutshell, Howey views ergonomics as the risk of greatest concern to office workers. "If people are going to be working in an office environment," he says, "they need to be properly positioned and situated."

Defining ergonomics as "fitting the job to the worker," Ramphal says failing to achieve that fit can prove costly in financial and worker health terms. For example, musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) account for 40 per cent of all lost-time claims filed with Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board. And those percentages are not so different in other jurisdictions country-wide.

"You can't redesign the human being, but you can redesign the work station," says Ramphal. MSDs are a result of overused muscles, tendons and ligaments, repetitive tasks, awkward positions and forceful movements.

General symptoms, notes information from the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), include numbness, tingling and burning, pain, clumsiness in the hands, swelling around the wrist and hand, and aches and pain that are strongest at night.

Bill Godkin, a consultant for Computer Ergonomics and Safety Consulting in Amherstview, Ontario, advises keeping an eye out

And pain need not be severe for protective measures to be pursued.

"Most employees will hesitate to discuss their pain problems and levels, as they tend to accept it as part of the job," Godkin suggests. If the worker has gone so far as to use a chiropractor, massage therapist, physiotherapist or family doctor to deal with pain issues, an assessment is clearly in order.

The all-too-common response of "eating Advil like candies" needs to stop, Godkin argues. For many employees, it has become an accepted practice, but it also masks bigger problems.

"Workers with a repetitive strain injury in one part of the body may develop problems in other areas at the same time," CUPE reports. "When feeling discomfort or pain from doing work in one particular way, they may try and compensate through movements that cause other strain injuries," the union adds.

"Employees need to come forward and report their concerns to their employer and seek treatment for their pain," Godkin advises. The best thing a worker can do is to listen to his or her body and take charge of personal health.

Godkin networks with a number of health care providers to address a condition they call the "circle of pain," he says. Patients with ergonomics problems seem to complete an average of eight treatments. "After each treatment, they return to work in a poor ergonomic environment, and their pain problems continue to exist, sometimes even worse."

The thinking of those undergoing treatment, but having pain return, is that treatments are simply not working, Godkin reports. In reality, if a proper ergonomics assessment had been done and changes made, he argues the "circle of pain" would be broken.

Some common recommendations include positioning work so a person can sit comfortably and minimize stress on any specific area of the body, varying positions and tasks, and matching tools to an individual's size and preferences.

Ergonomics is so much more than a work station or a chair, Godkin suggests. Other elements that must be considered as part of any assessment are the quality of work station components, lighting levels and quality, employee stretching, appropriate and comfortable footwear, and hand and finger safety.

The very best modern buildings, notes the information from Flexibility Ltd., incorporate zoned temperature and air quality control, natural lighting and good sound insulation.

Offices with better maintenance programs, Haverkate says, will likely decrease the potential for unhealthy airborne particles.

In the air

When it comes to office settings, it's not just about where you walk and how you sit. Indoor air quality (IAQ) is an ongoing issue because building design, outdoor air pollution, cleaning products and office equipment and products — such as photocopiers, laser printers and computers — can increase the level of indoor air contamination, notes information from Health Canada.

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) in Hamilton, Ontario reports that poor IAQ has spurred reports of the following health issues:

- sick building syndrome — describes cases in which occupants of buildings experience adverse health effects apparently associated with the time they spend in the building;
- building-related illness — refers to less frequent (but often more serious) cases of people becoming ill after being in a specific building at a certain time; and,
- multiple chemical sensitivities — defines the reaction of a

worker to a number of chemicals in indoor air, each of which may occur at very low concentrations.

Frank Haverkate, an environmental consultant/trainer for Haverkate and Associates, and director of the Toronto chapter of the Indoor Air Quality Association, says that, as a countermeasure, some newer buildings are keeping printers and photocopiers in a single room with dedicated ventilation systems to draw out any airborne particulates.

Ramphal explains that whatever air leaves the office environment must be balanced by an equal amount of fresh air coming in. If this pattern is not in place, inadequate ventilation will inevitably lead to illnesses related to airborne contaminants, he argues.

Health Canada notes the number of IAQ-related complaints is up in recent years with the increase in building tightness, the growing use of synthetic materials, and energy conservation measures that reduce the amount of outside air supply.

Occupant complaints, multi-factorial in nature, often have an elusive link to chemical, microbiological, physical and psychological mechanisms, the department reports.

Ramphal says that, in general, about 85 per cent of the people who work in offices spend all of their time indoors. "If your office space is designed for seven people, but you put 10 people there instead, where is that carbon dioxide (CO₂) going to go?" he asks.

If CO₂ levels are high as a result of poor ventilation, Haverkate points out, that creates a whole host of additional problems, such as elevated humidity, dust levels and chemical offgassing.

That's where good housekeeping comes in. That alone can help reduce IAQ complaints in offices, suggests Haverkate. "We see offices that are maintained and cleaned properly, have good maintenance practices, and then we see offices that don't," he points out.

Offices with better maintenance programs, Haverkate says, will likely decrease the potential for unhealthy airborne particles.

Getting a professional assessment is the safest course of action, he suggests, but that doesn't mean building staff and owners should wait to take whatever steps possible to ensure the heating, ventilation and air conditioning system is well-maintained.

With regard to mould, the mere mention of which can elicit considerable anxiety, any water damage that contributes to mould growth must be "addressed right away," Haverkate says.

