

Display Screen Equipment

Work with display screen equipment has been associated with muscular and other physical problems, eye fatigue and mental stress, which can be prevented by good ergonomic design of equipment, furniture, the working environment and the tasks performed. Under the Display Screen Equipment (DSE) Regulations 1992 employers must:-

- assess workstations and the risks to users' health and safety.
- reduce or eliminate those risks.
- ensure that workstations satisfy minimum requirements.
- plan work activities ensuring periodic breaks or changes from screen use.
- provide users with an eye and eyesight test and corrective appliances.
- consult, inform and instruct users on the health and safety aspects of their job.

Who and What is Covered

The difficulty with some of the duties put on employers is that they only apply to "users".

Users are defined in the regulations as:-

"an employee who habitually uses display screen equipment as a significant part of his (sic) normal work".

The guidance further states that someone is a user if one or more of the following apply:-

- the person depends on DSE to do the job because alternative means are unavailable
- the person has no discretion as to the use or non-use of the DSE
- particular skills are needed in the use of DSE to do the job
- the person normally uses DSE for prolonged spells of more than one hour
- the person uses DSE in this way more or less daily
- fast transfer of information between the user and the screen is an important requirement of the job; and
- the performance requirements of the system demand high levels of attention and concentration by the user.

Most GPMU members working with DSE will fall into this category. The GPMU recommends that a user is someone who uses a screen for more than an hour a day or five hours a week.

Workstations

The Regs define display screen equipment (formerly called visual display units or VDU's) as:-

"alphanumeric or graphic display screen regardless of the display process involved".

But it excludes screens for which the main use is to show television or film pictures. The GPMU considers that members working on such equipment should be covered by the Regs.

Assessing risks

Employers need to analyse:
the whole workstation including equipment, furniture and the work environment
the job being done, and
any special needs of individual staff whose views may be sought as part of the assessment

Where risks are identified the employer must take steps to reduce them.

Minimum requirements

Minimum requirements are set out in the Schedule to the Regs, and identify the good features that should normally be found in a workstation, such as adjustable chairs and suitable lighting. Other requirements cover screens, keyboards, desks, chairs, the work environment and software.

Planning Work

Employers are required to plan the activities of users so that their daily work on DSE is periodically interrupted by breaks or changes of activity. Short frequent breaks are more satisfactory than occasional breaks. This is supported by a study commissioned by the HSE and the guidance to the Regs suggests a 5-10 minute break every hour is likely to be better than 15 minutes every 2 hours. GPMU policy calls for breaks totalling 15 minutes in any one hour period. Individuals should have discretion over when to take breaks.

Eye and Eyesight Tests

All users and those who are going to be a user are entitled to a proper eye and eyesight test. This should include a test of vision and an examination of the eye by a registered medical practitioner. Vision screening tests do not meet the requirements of the regulations. The tests should be arranged by the employer at no cost to the employee, i.e. they should be during working time or with paid time off. The tests should be given before starting DSE work, at regular intervals, and if users experience visual difficulties attributable to the work. If corrective appliances, such as glasses or lenses, are needed as a result of DSE work then these must be paid for by the employer. The employer's liability for payment is restricted to the cost of basic frames and lenses adequate for their use.

The Regs are silent about payment for time off for to have an eye test. As far as the GPMU is concerned employers must also meet these costs, as failure to do so would represent a "charge" against the employee. This is explicitly forbidden under Section 9 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, which states:

"No employer shall levy or permit to be levied on any employee of his any charge in respect of anything done or provided in pursuance of any specific requirements of the relevant statutory provisions."

Training and Information

Training and information must be provided and include:-

- the details of the DSE Regulations
- the recognition of causes of hazards
- posture
- adjustment of the equipment
- the importance of breaks or changes in work activity; and
- the procedure for reporting problems.

Refresher training and special training should be provided for those who return to work after break, and where the workstation has been substantially modified. The aim of training should be to reduce or minimise the risk in relation to visual, musculo-skeletal and stress related factors.

Action Points

1. Use your rights to be consulted before any new display screen equipment is brought in, to ensure it use meets the minimum standards.
2. Ensure you are involved in the risk assessment, so that any injuries such as WRULDs are identified and prevented.
3. Use your rights to be involved in the planning and organisation of training in the use of DSE.
4. Ensure that there are proper breaks or changes in activity. There should be at least a ten minute break for every hour worked on the screen.
5. Ensure that where a DSE user becomes pregnant, she is able to transfer to non-VDU work during the course of the pregnancy without loss of pay, status and career prospects.
6. Ensure that all users request eye and eyesight tests from their employer. The cost of the tests and glasses must be met by the employer, including time off with pay to attend for the test.



Subjects dealt with in the schedule

- adequate lighting
- adequate contrast, no glare or distracting reflections
- distracting noise minimised
- leg room and clearances to allow postural changes
- window covering
- software: appropriate to task, adapted to user, provides feedback on system status, no undisclosed monitoring
- screen: stable image, adjustable, readable, glare/reflection free
- keyboard: usable, adjustable, detachable, legible
- work surface: allow flexible arrangements, spacious, glare free
- work chair: adjustable
- footrest

Seating and posture for typical DSE tasks

Seat back adjustability

Good lumbar support

Seat height adjustability

No excess pressure on underside of thighs and backs of knees

Foot support if needed

Space for postural change, no obstacles under desk

Forearms approximately horizontal

Minimal extension, flexion or deviation of wrists

Screen height and angle should allow comfortable head position

Space in front of keyboard to support hands/wrists during pauses in keying