

Home Office Ergonomics

Working from home, telecommuting, is a perk for employees and has significant benefits to the employer. However, with these benefits come additional risks. One such risk is injuries to workers that are ergonomic in nature.

Consider these questions:

1. Is the employee's home office the kitchen table or the breakfast nook or a kitchen island or a lap desk while on the couch?
2. Does the employee have a specific place that is or can be set up as a home office?
3. As the employer, what are your responsibilities for providing "...a place of employment free from recognized hazards.." aka a safe workplace while a worker is working from home?
4. If a worker is injured while working at home when is it an OSHA Recordable Injury?

Ergonomic injuries include carpal tunnel syndrome and soft tissue injuries due to resting arms/wrists on the sharp edges of a desk or table. Symptoms of potential injuries include tired eyes, sore back or neck, aching legs, and/or headaches. Other injuries can be caused by slip, trip and fall incidents over loose rugs, electric cords, toys, or pets.

The best way to significantly reduce the potential for ergonomic injuries is to set the home office up correctly based upon the individual employee. It is very important to have an adjustable chair and then the other items can be adjusted based upon the employee's position as far as desktop height, keyboard position, monitor position, and possibly a foot stool. There are two good articles with diagrams on how to set up a home office listed below (the title is the hyperlink):

[Travelers Insurance "How to Set Up Your Home Office"](#)
[AON "Transitioning to Virtual/Home Based Work"](#)

Training for the worker and supervisor is very important for setting up the employee's home office so that the potential for discomfort and/or injuries is reduced. The training should include defining and describing ergonomic injuries along with the symptoms. Early recognition of the symptoms by the individual employee along with early reporting of the symptoms to the supervisor can effectively reduce the potential for injury. For example, when the employee reports that their wrists are starting to ache or that they are getting headaches or reporting other early symptoms, the employer can intervene to determine what is causing the symptoms and then develop corrective actions that could include the employee providing a photo of their home office set-up, complete a measurement diagram showing the current set-up of the home office, a description of work causing the symptoms to appear, or a combination of these and other actions. This is where it gets difficult for the employer because OSHA has no federal regulations for ergonomics. Employers have been very hesitant in the past to go to an employee's home office to do inspections due to privacy issues. Training a worker to do this on their own home office and reporting this to the employer along with a photo may be a pre-requisite for allowing an employee to establish a home office.



"Working Safe, Preventing Injuries, & Protecting Profits"

As far as an ergonomic injury from working at a home office being an OSHA Recordable injury, there is a specific question and answer provided on the OSHA website (OSHA.gov). In the section on the OSHA website titled "OSHA Injury and Illness Recordkeeping: Q & A Search", the question is FAQ ID: 409. OSHA says the injury or illness is Recordable if it occurs "...while the employee is performing work for pay or compensation...(and)...is directly related to the performance of work rather than to the general home environment or setting." OSHA gives a couple of examples with one being that if an employee drops a box of work documents on their foot causing an injury that meets the definition of recordable injury or illness, this would be considered work-related and is an OSHA Recordable injury. However, in another example, if an employee is injured because they trip on the family dog while rushing to answer a work phone call, the case is not considered work-related and would not be an OSHA Recordable injury. There are two other examples listed in the answer to FAQ 409 that are not included here though worth reviewing on your own.

It is worth noting that injuries that occur to employees while working at home are compensable through workers' compensation insurance. You should talk with your insurance broker and insurance carrier for the specifics of your policy.

Training employees and supervisors on ergonomic injuries, early symptom recognition and reporting, early intervention, coaching, and prompt corrective actions are the primary tools employers should use to significantly reduce the potential for ergonomic injuries and other injuries that could occur at an employee's home office.

For more information or assistance with your safety and health needs, contact Wayne Vanderhoof CSP at wayne@rjrsafety.com or 724-809-4234; website: www.rjrsafety.com.

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