

GUIDELINES ON THE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF OFFICE WORKERS

*Achieving a
Healthy
and Safe
Working Life
-Together*

**HEALTH AND SAFETY
AUTHORITY HEADQUARTERS**
10 Hogan Place, Dublin 2
Tel. (01) 614 7000
Fax. (01) 614 7020
e-mail: infotel@hsa.ie
website: www.hsa.ie



Athlone Regional Office

Government Buildings
Pearse Street
Athlone
Co Westmeath
Tel: (0902) 92608
Fax: (0902) 92914

Cork Regional Office

3rd Floor
1A South Mall
Cork
Tel: (021) 4251212
Fax: (021) 4251217

Galway Regional Office

Odeon House
Eyre Square
Galway
Tel: (091) 563985
Fax: (091) 564091

Limerick Regional Office

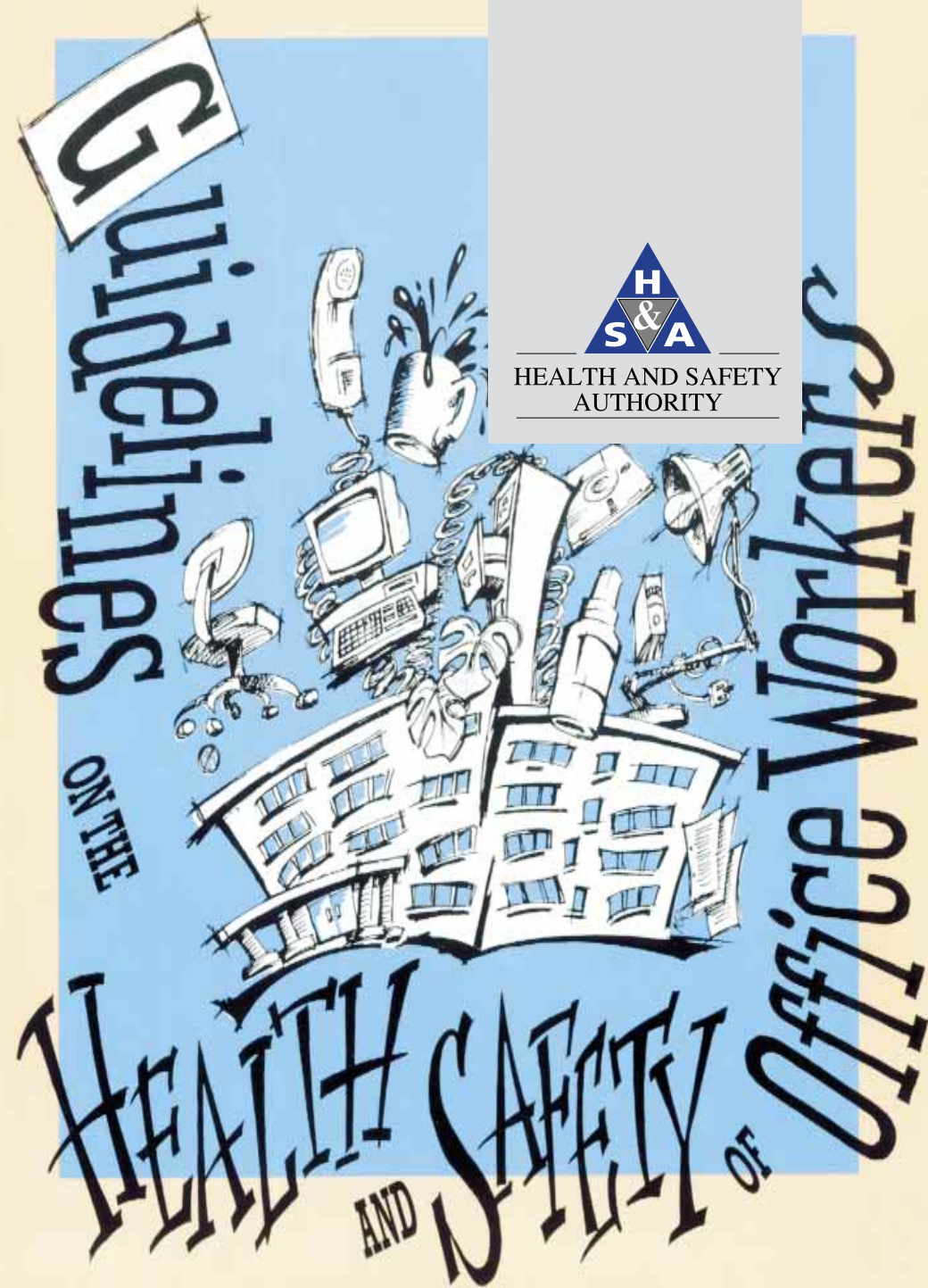
Ground Floor
Park House
1-2 Barrington Street
Limerick
Tel: (061) 419900
Fax: (061) 419559

Sligo Regional Office

Government Offices
Cranmore Road
Sligo
Tel: (071) 43942
Fax: (071) 44078

Waterford Regional Office

5th Floor
Government Buildings
The Glen
Waterford
Tel: (051) 875892
Fax: (051) 870610



C ONTENTS



PrefacePage 2

The law.....3

Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 1989.....3

- Employer’s duties.....3
- Employee’s duties4
- Consultation4
- Safety Statement.....5

Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations, 1993.....6

Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Miscellaneous Welfare Provisions) Regulations, 1995.....6

Risk Management and the Safety Statement6

- Electricity7
- Slips, trips and falls.....7
- Manual handling.....8
- VDUs.....8
- Work equipment8
- Chemicals.....9
- Emergencies9
- Violence9
- Stress.....9
- Transport9

- Health and the office environment.....10

Health and the office environment10

- Ventilation10
- Workstations10
- Temperature10
- Lighting.....10
- Eating facilities.....10
- Smoking10
- Welfare facilities.....10
- Minimum number of welfare facilities11
- Washbasins11
- Cleanliness11

Other requirements.....12

- Health and safety training.....12
- Accident reporting12
- First-aid.....12
- Health surveillance.....12

Further reading from the HSA 13

Useful UK Health and Safety Executive booklets13

PREFACE

The purpose of this booklet is to provide practical advice on the principal office hazards that should be controlled in order to prevent accidents and work related illness. The health, safety and welfare of office workers are covered principally by the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 1989 and supplementary regulations. (These replace the Office Premises Act, 1958).

While this booklet presents an outline of the legal requirements it is not intended as a legal interpretation of the law. Further information may be obtained from the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) at any of the addresses listed at the back of this booklet.

Published in August 1998 by the Health and Safety Authority, 10 Hogan Place, Dublin 2.
© All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Health and Safety Authority.



THE LAW

The safety, health and welfare of office workers are covered principally by the *Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 1989*, the *Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations, 1993* and the *Safety, health and Welfare at Work (Miscellaneous Welfare Provisions) Regulations, 1995*.

These laws place general duties of care on employers, self employed and employees. The key elements in these laws which should form the central part of an accident prevention system for the office are:

- the preparation of a Safety Statement which is based on a risk assessment of activities in the office,
- putting in place an employee Safety Consultation programme and facilitating the selection of Safety Representative by employees,
- providing adequate welfare facilities.

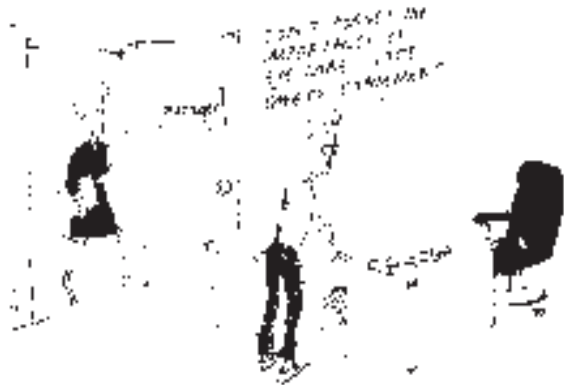


SAFETY, HEALTH AND WELFARE AT WORK ACT, 1989

Employers duties

Employers have a legal responsibility for ensuring the office under their control is safe for working in. They must ensure their employees health and safety at all times while at work. These responsibilities include ensuring:

- a safe workplace,
- safe means of access and egress,
- safe systems of work,
- providing information and training to employees so that they can look after their own safety,
- providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to employees as determined by a risk assessment of their operations (e.g. provision of



gloves for chemical handling, personal protection for cleaners), planning for emergencies (e.g. gas leaks).

In the Safety Statement which they are required to prepare they must spell out their programme for ensuring employee safety and health. They must ensure that procedures for safety consultation, either formal or informal are in place where health and safety issues can be reviewed and acted upon. They also have duties of care to visitors to the office including members of the public and any others who use equipment at their workplace (e.g. window cleaners, service people).

Employees duties

Office workers have responsibilities too. They must take reasonable care of their own safety and not endanger their own or colleagues' safety by their actions or failure to act. They must:

- co-operate with their employer on health and safety,
- report to their supervisor any defects in equipment which might cause a hazard,

- use any equipment, tools, machines or chemicals safely,
- use any personal protective equipment provided for their safety in the correct manner.

Consultation

There is a duty on employers to have in place procedures whereby they can consult employees as to how the 1989 Act can be complied with in their workplace. Areas that might be reviewed during consultation include:

- the preparation of the Safety Statement,
- information and training on health and safety issues,
- new work practices that might affect health and safety,
- the installation and use of new equipment,
- wearing of PPE,
- VDU work,
- working conditions generally (e.g. heating, temperature, lighting and ventilation).



Dialogue on these issues should be a two way process with every effort made to reach a meaningful solution. Where there is a Safety Representative he/she should be involved in this consultation process. Safety Consultation and Safety Representatives are covered by a separate HSA booklet (1).



Safety Statement

The employer must prepare a Safety Statement in writing. This is a programme for managing safety and health in the workplace. It should begin with a policy statement on how the employer intends complying with the law. The statement should be based on an identification of the hazards and an assessment of the risks in the office. Employees, including the Safety Representative, must be consulted and have access to it. The risk assessment results should be incorporated into the Safety Statement where appropriate.

The terms hazard and risk are often used interchangeably but have separate meanings. A **hazard** is anything at work which might cause you harm (e.g. electricity, hot surfaces, slippery floors, lifting heavy loads) while **risk** is the likelihood that harm could occur from a particular hazard and its consequences. Assessing the risk is the process of evaluating the risks in your office and putting in place the most appropriate controls or safety devices in order to prevent accidents. For manual handling hazards the risk assessment may be just noting that there is a likelihood of back injury and setting out the preventative measures in the statement.

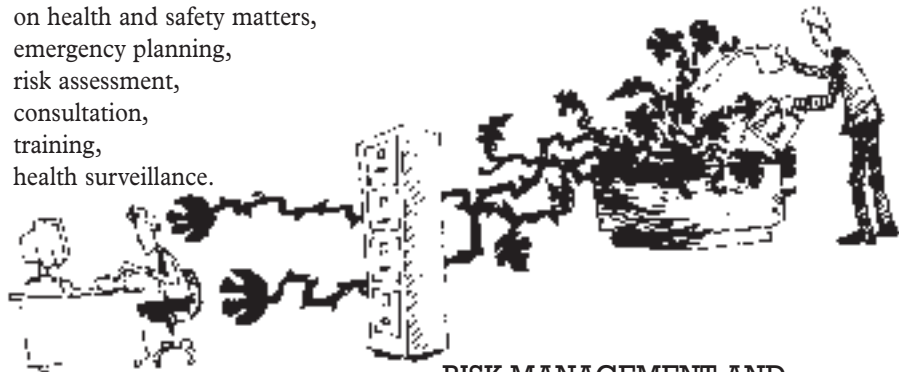
In preparing the statement it is useful to review the most common causes of office accidents and if these hazards exist in your office, deal with them in the statement. Some of the more common office hazards and the controls that must be used are discussed in detail below.

Finally, the statement should name those persons in the office who are responsible for ensuring that safety controls are put and retained in place. The HSA has produced separate guidelines on Safety Statement preparation (2), (3) and a short guide to health and safety law (4) which would be applicable to offices. These booklets can be used for preparing the safety statement.

SAFETY, HEALTH AND WELFARE AT WORK (GENERAL APPLICATION) REGULATIONS, 1993.

These Regulations give effect to several EU Directives and expand upon the employer/ employee duties and consultation requirements in the 1989 Act. They have specific requirements on:

- co-operation between different employers using the same workplace,
- the provision of designated persons on health and safety matters,
- emergency planning,
- risk assessment,
- consultation,
- training,
- health surveillance.



Detailed workplace requirements are set out as well as those for work equipment, PPE, manual handling, VDUs, electricity, first-aid and accident reporting. These requirements are covered in more detail by HSA booklet 'A Short Guide to Health and Safety Law' (4).

Some of the requirements in these 1993 Regulations which are particularly relevant to offices are described in this booklet.

SAFETY, HEALTH AND WELFARE AT WORK (MISCELLANEOUS WELFARE PROVISIONS) REGULATIONS, 1995

These Regulations apply to all workplaces including offices and have requirements to keep a workplace in a clean state, by regular cleaning (at least once per week), to remove rubbish on a daily basis and to provide adequate sitting facilities, a supply of drinking water and facilities for taking meals.

RISK MANAGEMENT AND THE SAFETY STATEMENT

The Safety Statement should be based on the identification of hazards and an assessment of risks in your office.

The following is an assessment of the principal risks found in offices and how they should be managed. This list can be used when preparing your Safety Statement. Further guidance on these issues is given in HSA booklets (1 - 5).

Electricity

Defective plugs, sockets and leads cause more electrical accidents than the appliances themselves. Electrical safety arrangements should include:

- providing sufficient socket outlets and avoiding the use of adaptors. Overloaded sockets are a fire hazard,
- testing the residual current device, if fitted. This only involves pushing a test button and can help to maintain the effectiveness of the device. Advice on how often to do this is normally given in the manufacturer's instructions,
- prohibiting the use of taped joints to connect leads since they have neither the mechanical strength needed nor sufficient insulation. Damaged leads should be replaced completely but if leads have to be joined, proper connectors must be used,
- carrying out your own visual inspection of plugs and leads and getting them repaired as necessary. Faults to look out for include physical damage to the lead, failure of the cord grip at the plug and signs of overheating. If faults are found the repair should be carried out by someone who has the necessary skill and knowledge to complete the task safely,
- considering whether you have equipment which needs a more detailed inspection and test or whether the installation itself has reached a stage where it is likely to need a test. For example, equipment in offices which is frequently moved

or has a lead which is subject to a lot of twisting may develop an internal fault,

- not ignoring obvious telltale signs such as faulty switching or intermittent stopping. These may indicate an internal fault such as a loose wire which could cause external metalwork to become live,
- switching off equipment before unplugging and before cleaning,
- finding out how to deal with an electric shock incident. A poster giving this information is available from the Health Promotion Unit, Department of Health, or the National Irish Safety Organisation,
- encouraging staff to report electrical equipment which is not working properly,
- ensuring that staff are aware of these safety precautions.

Slips, trips and falls

Slips, trips and falls account for most of the accidents in offices, many of them when staff are moving or carrying loads. They happen because of the condition of floors, poor lighting or untidiness. Such accidents can easily be prevented by adhering to the following steps:

- not allowing trailing leads to create tripping hazards,
- clearing up spillages on floors quickly,
- replacing or repairing torn or broken floor coverings etc,
- ensuring stairs are well lit,
- ensuring that passageways and corridors are kept tidy.



Manual handling

A common office hazard is the manual movement of loads leading to back injuries and pains in hand, wrist and neck. To reduce the likelihood of these types of accidents the requirements are:

- remove the need for manual handling that could be the cause of injury,
- identify those tasks where manual handling cannot be avoided and assess the risk of injury,
- reduce the risk of injury by rearranging the work being done (e.g. have paper delivered to photocopier by hand truck rather than manually carrying it from stores, reduce weight to be lifted, etc.),
- provide manual handling training to workers who need it (e.g. messengers, service attendants etc.) and give them information on the weights being lifted and how to plan a lift.

If cabinets, desks or other heavy office equipment have to be moved do take particular precautions which would include providing hand trucks or trolleys and using team lifting. More details on how to carry out manual handling risk assessments are given in

the HSA Guidance on the 1993 General Application Regulations (5).

Visual Display Units (VDUs)

The main problems which can occur with the use of VDUs are related to the design of the job or workstation. If there is intensive or continuous use in your office, make sure that there are adequate breaks and that users know how to arrange their work and workstation to avoid awkward movements, reflections, aches and pains. The 1993 General Application Regulations require employers to carry out a risk assessment of the VDU workstation including the keyboard, the VDU screen, printer, workchair, workdesk and the VDU work environment (e.g. lighting, glare, reflections, humidity, temperature) and software. More detailed guidance on VDU risk assessment is given in the HSA Guidelines on the 1993 General Application Regulations (5). For habitual VDU users i.e. more than one hour continuous use per day, eye tests must be provided.

Work equipment

Equipment used in the office (e.g. paper shredders, photocopiers, fax-machines, printing machines) should be used in accordance with supplier's instructions and should be kept in good condition at all times, be repaired or serviced by qualified persons and any defects reported to the office manager. Passenger lifts should be thoroughly examined on a regular basis by a competent person. Ensure any contract maintenance staff

using/operating office equipment are given the same health and safety protection as regular office workers.

Chemicals

Small quantities of chemicals are used in the office and include printing inks, photocopier toners, cleaning chemicals and correction fluids. Ensure office workers are aware of their hazards. These hazards together with the appropriate safeguards are normally detailed in the material safety data sheets (available from chemical suppliers). Keep these sheets up-to-date and keep them in a location where workers can consult them easily.

Emergencies

The type of emergencies that could occur in the office include fires, gas leaks and lift failure. To ensure an orderly evacuation from the office an emergency plan should be prepared and tested on a regular basis. The plan should cover fire drills/safe evacuation, how to shut off machines and leave the workplace safe, name persons who are responsible for the evacuation and calling the emergency services, and detail the assembly areas. The emergency plan can be attached to the Safety Statement.

Violence

If your staff are at risk from violent attacks when transporting or handling cash or dealing with the public you should identify the likely violent situations and put in place appropriate safety precautions to prevent the

attacks and limit their effects. These precautions should be covered in the Safety Statement. Additional guidance is given in the HSA booklet Violence at Work (6).



Stress

Workplace stress is of increasing concern in offices and is still poorly understood. Stress arises when the demands on the worker exceed the capacity to cope. Stressful situations should be identified in the office and safeguards must be implemented at organisational level to minimise the risks. This might mean making changes in the organisation of the work. See HSA booklet on stress (7) for more guidance.

Transport

A number of office workers have been killed going to and coming from the office by cars, lorries and other vehicles in the office car park. Make sure walkways in car parks are suitably lit and there is safe means for pedestrians and vehicles to circulate.

h HEALTH AND THE OFFICE ENVIRONMENT

In some of the larger offices workers may experience some ill-health effects which may be due to the office environment (e.g. headaches, lethargy, eye, nose, throat problems) and require competent investigations. To prevent such ill-health in the office ensure the following issues are addressed:



Ventilation

Ventilation must be adequate. For most offices opening windows or doors will provide adequate ventilation. Where mechanical ventilation or air-conditioning is provided make sure the system is regularly checked, kept clean and well maintained to prevent a growth of legionella bacteria or other organisms.

Workstations

Workstations should be comfortable with safe and suitable chairs and sufficient space. Allow 4.65 square metres floorspace as a minimum for each person working in the office. This should exclude space taken up by fixtures such as presses and filing cabinets.

Temperature

A comfortable temperature must be maintained. A temperature of 17.5°C should be the minimum temperature for sedentary workers. In addition windows, skylights or glass partitions in offices should not allow excessive temperatures to be reached during hot weather. The heating system should not result in offensive or injurious fumes entering the office.

Lighting

Adequate lighting must be provided. Where possible offices should have natural lighting. When artificial lighting is used it should be sufficient so as to avoid visual fatigue and prevent glare or reflection into the workers eyes.

Eating facilities

Eating facilities must be available. Ensure adequate facilities for boiling water and taking meals are provided for office employees or ensure they have reasonable access to these facilities. Meals should not be taken in an office where there is a risk to safety, hygiene or health.

Smoking

The Department of Health & Children's booklet "Working Together for Cleaner Air" will help you to put in place an appropriate smoking policy.

Welfare facilities

Welfare facilities should be adequate. Provide enough toilets for employees and keep them clean and in good order. For washing, provide hot and cold (or warm) running water, soap

and towels or other means of drying. The minimum welfare facilities are given in table 1 below. A wholesome supply of drinking water should also be provided.

MINIMUM NUMBER OF WELFARE FACILITIES

Table 1 shows the minimum number of sanitary conveniences which should be provided. The number of people at work shown in column 1 refers to the maximum number likely to be in the workplace at any one time. Where separate sanitary accommodation is provided for a group of workers, for example men, women, office workers or manual workers, a separate calculation should be made for each group. See HSA Guidelines (5) for more details.

Table 1

<i>Number of people at work</i>	<i>Number of water closets</i>
1 to 5	1
6 to 25	2
26 to 50	3
51 to 75	4
76 to 100	5

Sanitary facilities should be kept clean and well ventilated. They must not exit into a work-room except through the open air or an intervening ventilated space. The facilities must be located as near as possible to the office.

Where there are no separate facilities provided for the public, the number of conveniences specified above should be increased as necessary to ensure that workers can use the facilities without undue delay.

Washbasins

One washbasin must be provided for every 20 employees up to 100 employees and one for every 40 employees, or part thereof, after that.

Cleanliness

The standard of cleanliness required will depend on the use to which the office is put. Floors and indoor traffic routes should be cleaned at least once per week. Any waste material that accumulates should be removed on a daily basis. Interior walls, ceilings, windows and work surfaces should be cleaned at suitable intervals, so as to maintain an appropriate hygiene standard. Ensure contract office cleaners are given the same health and safety protection as regular office workers.





OTHER REQUIREMENTS:

Health and safety training

The three types of training required for office workers include:

- **Induction** - so that new entrants get to know the basics such as fire evacuation, good housekeeping, electricity and VDU safety and the Safety Statement,
- **Skills** - so that staff who have specific responsibilities under the Safety Statement including the Safety Representative can undertake them in a competent manner e.g. manual handling training, VDU assessments, office inspections, accident investigations,
- **Management training** - which gives a good overview of the law including guidance and need for risk assessments and preparing safety management programmes.

For a well organised office the Safety Statement should spell out the safety training programme and commitment to provide resources to implement it. The key to induction and skills training is that office workers require the knowledge to do what is expected of them. Management training involves in particular understanding the process of risk assessment and their legal obligations. The training

can be based on the accident trends for the office environment and include slips, trips and falls, back injuries from manual handling, upper limb disorders e.g. VDU work and fire protection. For further information please see HSA Advisory Committee Report on Health and Safety Training (8).

Accident reporting

Any accident in the office which results in a worker being injured and being unable to perform his/her normal duties for more than 3 consecutive days should be reported to the Health and Safety Authority on Form IR1. All fatal accidents should be reported straight away by phone, fax or e-mail. Certain dangerous occurrences should also be reported on Form IR3. Forms IR1 and IR3 are available from the HSA. See HSA Guidelines (5) for more details on the reporting requirements.

First-aid

A first-aid box should be available in the office and kept fully stocked. Someone should be appointed to look after it, take charge in an emergency and call an ambulance. While smaller offices might not need a trained first-aider by law, it is advisable to have one. The bigger offices should have an appropriate number of trained first-aiders depending on the risks

involved, the accidents likely to arise, the size and location of the office, the distribution of employees and the distance from external medical services. As a general rule there should be at least one first-aider where up to 100 employees are working in offices and pro rata for higher numbers employed.

Health surveillance

Health Surveillance facilities should be made available to office workers in certain cases such as routine eye-testing for VDU work. The level and extent of health surveillance will depend on the work being carried out in the office. Additional guidance is given in other HSA Guidelines (5).

FURTHER READING

FROM THE HSA

1. **Guidelines on Safety Consultation and Safety Representatives** (Revised 1997).
2. **Guidelines on Safety Statements** (Revised 1998).
3. **Safe to Work - A Guide on Preparing a Safety Statement for Small Businesses** (Revised 2000)
4. **A Short Guide to Health and Safety Law** (Revised 1999).
5. **Guidelines on the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 1989 and the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations, 1993** (1995).
6. **Violence at Work** (Revised 1998).
7. **Workplace Stress - Cause, Effects, Control** (1993).
8. **Health and Safety Authority Advisory Committee Report on Health and Safety Training** (1994).

USEFUL U.K. HEALTH AND SAFETY EXECUTIVE BOOKLETS

9. **Officewise IND(G) 173** (4/94).
10. **Approved Code of Practice on Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare Regulations, 1992)** ISBN 0011 88 63339 (11/92).
11. **Essentials of Health and Safety at Work.** ISBN 0 7176 0816X (4/92).