

rmp

Risk control

WFH Series: Display Screen Equipment (DSE)



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Introduction

As we know, March 2020 was a very significant time in history as the UK was placed into lockdown due to the growing number of COVID-19 cases. This resulted in all but essential businesses and services closing with immediate effect. Members of the public were told to stay at home and only leave to shop for essentials or go out in exceptional circumstances, including for one form of daily exercise¹.

Since that time, each nation within the UK has experienced a variation of lockdown constraints in line with increasing and decreasing numbers of infections.

Throughout the timeline of lockdown, government advice provided to workers has been clear and consistent: anyone who can work from home should do so^{2,3,4}.

The effect of the advice to work from home was significant. By April 2020, 46.6% of people in employment did some work at home, with 86% doing so as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic⁵.

A consequence of the lockdowns and the forced movement of the workforce into their own homes is that consideration is now being given to future working models, whether they are full office reoccupation, fulltime home working or hybrid models which split employees' time between the office and home⁶.

Employers should appreciate that their responsibility to protect the health and safety of their employees does not diminish if their employees are working from home.

Employees who work from home may spend many hours every day interacting with computers and other forms of information technology in order to perform their work-related duties. Therefore, consideration must be given to the risks associated with these interactions.

Ergonomics is a science concerned with the 'fit' between people and their work. It puts people first, taking account of their capabilities and limitations. Ergonomics aims to make sure that tasks, equipment, information and the environment fit each worker.

How can ergonomics and human factors improve health and safety? Applying safe ergonomic principles can:

- reduce the potential for accidents;
- reduce the potential for injury and ill health;
- improve performance and productivity⁷.

What is involved?

Homeworking can potentially make it more difficult for managers to understand what issues employees may be facing. Managers should consider how to create effective communications between themselves and the strategy for managing any risks to health and safety, including from poor ergonomics.

If the homeworking arrangement is temporary then a Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessment is not legally required. However, during any period of temporary home working, employers need to regularly discuss the arrangements with their employees. If the arrangements are adversely affecting the health and safety of the employee, the manager should take appropriate steps to remedy the situation. Employers should provide workers with advice and guidance on completing their own basic assessment at home.

Where employers decide to make working from home arrangements more permanent, they should explain how to carry out full workstation risk assessments and provide workers with appropriate equipment and advice on control measures.

Assess the risk

If the equipment they are using or the area they are working from is not suitable for the work they are undertaking then they could be at risk of developing health problems.

Musculoskeletal disorders such as back pain or upper limb disorders can arise. While the risk to users is generally low, they still can become significant over time if good practice is not followed. Therefore ergonomics are essential to maintaining the health of an employee. Homeworkers could develop health issues from a work table being too low or high which could manifest as tension and then develop into neck or shoulder pain.

Unsuitable chairs are another cause for concern. If a chair is unsupportive, this may cause issues such as joint, muscular issues within the knees, hips and back. It also may present an issue with poor blood circulation.

Hand, wrist and arm problems are common in office workers. Without a wrist rest, mouse or correctly adjusted workstation, they are even more at risk of carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, sprains and strains.

Some employees may have a medical condition or conditions that require specialist equipment or arrangements to be made.

The way employees set up their workstation may also present issues for the user, which places significant importance on the need for appropriate advice and guidance to be provided.

It is not always practicable for the employer to send someone else to conduct a risk assessment for homeworkers. A good solution is for the employer to train such workers to undertake their own risk assessments. This can be done by training homeworkers to use an ergonomic checklist and provide appropriate evidence (e.g. photographs). Employers should ensure workers have received the necessary training before being asked to complete a risk assessment.

This practical [workstation checklist \(PDF\)](#) may help.

Implement Controls

The employer should evaluate the results of the assessment and address any problems that prevent the employee from creating an adequate workplace at home.

In addition to training in risk assessment, homeworkers will need extra training and information about health and safety relating to DSE use (for example good posture, taking breaks etc.). This is important for all users, but is especially for homeworkers who are not under immediate supervision.

Homeworkers should be encouraged to employ the following the basic principles:

- Manage the time spent continually undertaking DSE work by taking frequent task breaks (5-10 mins every hour).
- Use an adjustable chair and adjust it according to specific needs.
- Position the computer screen about an arm's length away, with the top of the screen at eye-level.
- Make sure the screen image is clear and flicker free and adjust the font so it can be read easily.
- Avoid glare on the screen or keyboard keys.
- Use a separate mouse and keyboard where possible, ensuring forearm space is available.
- If a homeworkers legs are dangling and not supported then this can lead to strains to the back muscles. A footrest may be an appropriate solution.
- Ensure legs are unrestricted by ensuring the area under the workstation is free from clutter.
- Visually check computer / laptop power cables for signs of damage before use.
- Change position regularly, stretch frequently.

This document is part of the Working from Home Series (WFH)

- Reduce eyestrain by incorporating the 20:20:20 rule – for every 20 minutes spent looking at a computer screen, spend 20 seconds looking at an object 20 feet away.

Summary

The axis of how we work seems to have shifted and with that the risk that the workforce now presents has moved accordingly. Although the risk from DSE is relatively low. If not considered it could become a more significant issue as time progresses. A clear framework for managing health and safety risk is required, underscored by effective communication. Advice, instruction and training is vital if the issues that may present themselves from DSE use are to be avoided⁸.

References

- 1 The Independent, 2020, Coronavirus: When might the UK lockdown come to an end? [ONLINE]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/coronavirus-lockdown-uk-remove-end-review-schools-when-government-a9453246.html>
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- 6 BBC, 2020, Why the future of work might be 'hybrid', Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200824-why-the-future-of-work-might-be-hybrid>
- 7 HSE, Ergonomics and human factors at work. Available at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg90.pdf>
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Get in touch

For more information, please contact your broker, RMP risk control consultant or account director.



Risk Management Partners

The Walbrook Building
25 Walbrook
London EC4N 8AW

020 7204 1800
rmpartners.co.uk

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