



What's so dangerous about DSE?

When we hear about health and safety in the work place, we generally think of dangerous jobs that people do, such as builders, North Sea fishermen, fire-fighters and factory workers. But there is an increasing awareness of health and safety issues in the office. DSE - or Display Screen Equipment, generally isn't dangerous in an immediate sense, but poor working practice and posture over long periods of time can often lead to chronic pain and ill health.

What is DSE?

Display Screen Equipment (DSE) is the term used in the legislation, with a display screen defined as "any alphanumeric or graphic display screen" and the equipment referring to almost anything associated with the screen. For most of us that means our computer screen, and the equipment includes the keyboard and mouse, along with the desk we put it on, the chair we sit on, and the environment in the room around us. Some users may have different ways of inputting information - a graphic designer may use a tablet with a stylus, people working on a supermarket checkout may use a bar code reader.

The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 were put in place because it was recognised that DSE presents certain hazards to users, and that as use of DSE increased, health conditions related to DSE would become more common.

How dangerous is it?

Health problems can arise from DSE use when it is not correctly set-up, or when it is used incorrectly. A survey of DSE users conducted by the Institute of Occupational Medicine for the Health and Safety Executive (2007¹) found that:

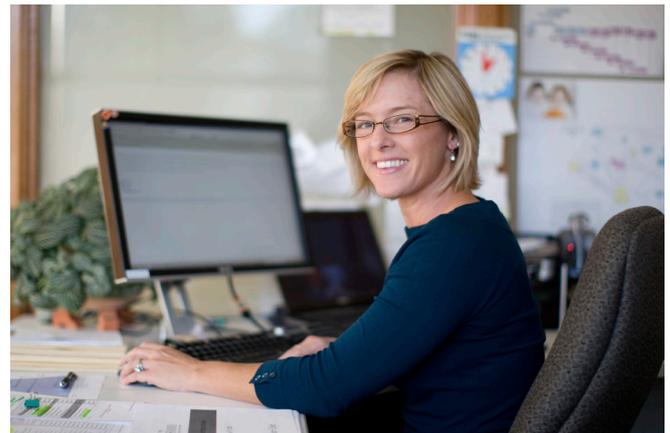
- 75% of users suffered from shoulder, back or neck pain
- 60% of users suffered from eyestrain
- 50% of users suffered from headaches

Japanese research² has even suggested that spending too long looking at computer screens can contribute to the onset of glaucoma, which can result in blindness. Some upper limb pain can be long term and disabling, with conditions such as tennis elbow, frozen shoulder and carpal tunnel syndrome.

The result of these conditions is that people work less efficiently, and may have to take time off work to recover. As well as the pain and suffering of individuals, this costs money, not only to the employer but the economy too.

Expensive?

Many changes required are quite simple - re-arranging the desk, providing a relatively cheap footrest or screen raiser, or moving noisy equipment into a separate room. A wrist rest and a flat keyboard for example would typically cost less than £30. The cost to the London Borough of Camden of not providing these to a typist was nearly £100,000 in damages³, plus the time and cost of the litigation.



So is it just DSE in the office?

No. An increasing problem is the amount of time people spend on laptop and handheld computers. Small screens used for long periods can result in eyestrain and headaches, and poor posture during use can lead to discomfort and pain. Employers are responsible for their employees wherever they are working, not just in the office. People working from home and mobile workers need individual DSE assessments.

Then, of course, there are all sorts of places where DSE is found, not just in a traditional office; call centres, factory machinery with display screens, till operators, all fall under the requirements of the Health & Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations

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What does the Law say?

The Health & Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations (1992) require:

- Employers to provide equipment that meets the standards laid out in the regulations, and to arrange an assessment of that equipment and the way the employee uses it.
- Employers to plan activities to allow users to take breaks from DSE use
- Employers to pay for eyesight tests as set out in the regulations
- Employers to provide adequate health and safety training in the use of any workstation upon which an employee is required to work and information about the health and safety issues.

In addition, the Management of Health and Safety Regulations (1999) reinforce the requirement to carry out risk assessments and to manage the risks identified.

Case law has demonstrated that an employer may be sued successfully for negligence if:

- An employee has an injury which they can prove was either caused or made worse by their work;
- The employer knew, could have known or should have known about the risk of injury;
- The employer could practically have done something to prevent or reduce the risk and failed to do so.

What can I do about it:

Display Screen Equipment does not need to be dangerous. You can protect against DSE related ill-health:

- Carry out a risk assessment and:
- Set-up equipment, including the screen, keyboard, mouse, desk and chair, correctly and provide a comfortable (lighting, heating, noise) environment;
- Use appropriate software for the task, with staff trained to be competent and efficient in its use;
- Plan work to allow for changes of routine and to avoid long periods of repetitive actions.

¹hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr561.htm

²<http://jech.bmj.com/content/58/12/1021.full.pdf> or see summary at naturaleyecare.com/pub_glaucoma.asp

³humanetechnology.co.uk/wruldii/wruld/claimants/p398.php

Note:

Whilst this fact sheet gives general guidance on the law relating to this topic at the time of drafting, it is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to this area of law. You are advised to seek specific advice in relation to any particular issues that need to be addressed in relation to this topic by a competent person.

