



**Australian Government**

**Comcare**

## EYE HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

This fact sheet complements the publication *Guidance on the management of eye health in the workplace* (OHS 63). The publication provides more general advice about the management of eye health and assists persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) and workers to work together and ensure an environment that is safe and without risks.

### WHY IS EYE HEALTH MANAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

Eye injuries in Australia cost around \$60 million per year. Up to 50 000 eye injuries occur per year—approximately seven in 1000 workers sustains this kind of injury. Sixty per cent of all eye injuries in Australia occur in the construction, mining, agriculture, forestry and fishing industries. Visual impairment or injury reduces a person's independence and can contribute to isolation, depression and adverse affects on work and social relationships.

Effective management of eye health is an important contribution to a healthy, safe and productive workplace.

### WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EYE HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE?

Both PCBUs and workers are responsible for eye health in the workplace.

### WHAT CAN I DO?

PCBUs have a duty of care under section 19 of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Cth) (WHS Act) to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of their workers while they are at work. PCBUs must provide and maintain a work environment that is healthy, safe and without risks to the health of workers, or other persons affected by the conduct of the business or undertaking.

PCBUs should identify tasks or workplace environments that present a risk of eye strain or injury. They need to assess and control the risks by ensuring appropriate workplace ergonomics, adequate lighting and air conditioning, and by providing personal protective equipment, first aid training and first aid officers. PCBUs should also promote general awareness of eye health.

Workers should work with PCBUs to identify and control eye hazards or hazardous activities and put in place eye safety procedures. Workers also need to know how to respond to eye injury and advise their PCBU of any discomfort or injury in the workplace. Workers also have responsibility under section 28 of the WHS Act to take reasonable care for their own health and safety, and to comply with reasonable safety instructions.

## DO SCREENS AFFECT MY HEALTH?

Computer screens have been blamed for a wide range of health problems. However, there is no evidence that screens cause disease or permanent damage to eyes. Long periods of work and visually demanding tasks can cause dry or tired eyes, headaches, blurred vision and other discomfort. Where these problems do occur, they are usually caused by the way in which screens are being used. Problems can be avoided with good job design and risk assessment. PCBUs and workers can help maintain their eye health by ensuring screens are well positioned and properly adjusted, workplace lighting is suitable, workplace ergonomics are appropriate and eye tests are undertaken as necessary.

## CAN COMPUTER WORK CAUSE HEADACHES?

Headaches from screen work may be caused by:

- > screen glare
- > poor image quality
- > a need for new or updated prescription lenses
- > stress from the pace of work
- > anxiety about new technology
- > reading the screen for long periods without a break
- > poor posture
- > a combination of these factors.

Many of these contributing factors can be fixed once the cause is identified or prevented through a risk management approach.

## HOW LONG SHOULD I USE A SCREEN FOR?

There is no prescribed limit, but long periods of screen work should be broken up. How often the breaks should occur depends on the type of work. The American Optometric Association suggests adopting a '20-20-20 rule'. This means taking a 20 second break at least every 20 minutes and looking at something 20 feet (6 metres) away.

## I USE A PORTABLE COMPUTER AND PDA—ARE THERE ANY PRECAUTIONS I SHOULD TAKE?

Although laptops and other portable screen devices are compact and easy to use, it is best to avoid using one on its own if a full-sized screen is available. People who habitually use portable computers and PDAs should be trained on how to minimise risks. This includes sitting comfortably, angling the screen so it can be seen clearly with minimal reflections, and taking frequent breaks to look in the distance. Laptops and small screens should be placed on a firm surface at the right height for keying to prevent leaning forward and eye strain. Continued use should be subject to an individual risk assessment.

## HOW CAN I AVOID HEADACHES, EYE DISCOMFORT AND GENERAL ACHES AND PAINS?

Problems of this kind may have a physical cause, but may be more likely if a screen user feels stressed by work. Workers experiencing aches or pains should advise their supervisor or line manager. Problems can often be avoided with good workplace design and appropriate work practices such as taking frequent short breaks from the workstation and screen. Prevention is most effective if risks are identified and documented, and action is taken early before a potential problem becomes serious.

## OTHER RISKS OF EYE INJURIES

- > impact or blunt force injury from objects and sport
- > foreign bodies in the eye—the most common work-related injury
- > exposure to lasers, high intensity light, radiation
- > chemical injury—the second most common cause of eye trauma
- > hazardous work such as welding, soldering and grinding
- > infectious agents such as herpes zoster, other viruses and round worms
- > exposure to ultraviolet light (UVB) and sunlight.

PCBUs, workers and other persons covered by the WHS Act should use a risk management approach to guide policy and eliminate or reduce eye injury and risks to eye health. Effective management of eye health is an important part of a healthy, safe and productive workplace.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Australian Government, Department of Health and Ageing: <http://www.health.gov.au/>

Australian Government, National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC): <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au>

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW): [www.aihw.gov.au](http://www.aihw.gov.au)

Australian Standards: <http://infostore.saiglobal.com>

Health and Safety Executive, United Kingdom: <http://www.hse.gov.uk>

Optometrists Association Australia: <http://www.optometrists.asn.au/>

Safe Work Australia: <http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/>

The American Optometric Association (AOA): <http://www.aoa.org/>

World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/en/>

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