

- informal breaks appear to be more effective than formal breaks
- where possible the breaks should be under the control of the worker.

## Sight Tests

The Display Screen Equipment Regulation 5 states that employers must provide VDU users with an appropriate eye examination and eye sight test before starting VDU work, at regular intervals and at any time you experience visual difficulties associated with using a VDU.

Also, if you require corrective vision glasses specifically for using a VDU your employer must pay for the cost of a pair of glasses that are adequate for that function.

The most common eyesight problem occurring with the use of VDUs is that of eyestrain.

## Symptoms of eye strain

- focusing difficulties
- double vision
- loss of visual sharpness
- aching, watering or dryness in the eye
- tenderness around the eyes

## If you require any further information

with regard to use of VDUs or Repetitive Strain Injuries then please contact Maureen Rooney National Officer or Adrian Cunningham Health and Safety Director at the AEEU Head Office on: 0181 462 7755.

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# RSI awareness

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# what is Repetitive Strain Injury?

**REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURY (RSI)** is a hazard that all AEEU members should be aware of. RSI occurs from repetitive movements that damage tendons, nerves, muscles and other soft body tissues.

It far easier to prevent than to cure; RSI can be very painful and lead to permanent disablement. AEEU members have the right to work in a safe environment, you should not be required to carry out work that puts your health at risk. If you have any concerns about your work environment you should contact your AEEU health and safety representative.

This guide has been produced to give you advice on how to prevent RSI, how to recognise the symptoms and what you should do if you suffer RSI.

## Types of RSI

- Tendonitis
- Peritendonitis
- Bursitis
- Tenosynovitis
- DeQuervain's Syndrome
- Thoracic Outlet Syndrome
- Trigger finger/thumb
- Epicondylitis

The above are all identifiable forms of RSI which have symptoms and evidence of the complaints, for example swelling or lumps. There are also diffuse RSI conditions where there is pain, but on examination a doctor can find no medical evidence of the RSI.

## The causes of RSI

- highly repetitive movements.
- excessively vigorous movements.
- over-stretching movements.
- static or incorrect posture.

There are a number of environmental factors in the work place that can be responsible for RSI.

- poor work station design
- poor design of equipment
- excessive production demands
- lack of breaks
- poor work processes
- lack of training

There are wide ranges of occupations where employees are vulnerable to RSI. Production line and assembly work in the electronics industry, clerical work and administrative work involving the use of key boards and VDUs.

## Risk assessment

Your employer has a legal duty to conduct risk assessments and to provide safe work methods, work places and equipment. And give employees health and safety information and training. AEEU health and safety representatives have a legal right to investigate any complaint made by a member with regard to an injury or ill health.

Risk assessments involve identifying hazards and assessing whether they are putting the health and safety of employees at risk. It also involves identifying the measures needed to prevent or control these risks. Employers have a legal duty to put those measures into place.

Prevention of RSI relies on good job design both in terms of the physical work environment and the job content. There may be a number of changes that need to be made to ensure that your work environment minimises risk.

## Compensation

Many employers are being sued for causing RSI to employees. Where employers have not warned

employees of the risks of RSI the courts have found them negligent. Your employer must take positive action to reduce the risks and prevent RSI.

## Disablement benefit

It may also be possible to claim compensation through the Industrial Injuries Compensation Scheme. The only forms of RSI recognised as an industrial disease is 'cramp in the hand or forearm due to repetitive movements' and this is in relation to keyboard work. In addition, to claim disablement benefit the sufferer must be assessed as being at least 14% disabled. The AEEU advises to claim for this benefit even though the chances of receiving the benefit are small.

## Symptoms of RSI

- discomfort in the fingers, hands, wrists, forearms or elbows. The discomfort may be stiffness, soreness or burning sensations.
- pain, tingling, numbness or coldness in the hands.
- loss of strength or co-ordination in the hands.
- disturbed sleep at night due to pain.

Don't ignore the symptoms as this may cause further injury, you may need a complete break from work to rest the affected area.

Get treatment for the injury, make an appointment to see your doctor. Be aware that some doctors may have a limited understanding of RSI. As well as rest and use of a wrist brace, there are a range of physiotherapy and alternative therapy treatments for RSI, ask your doctor for referral. It may be necessary for you to have surgery in severe cases.

Contact your shop steward and health and safety representative for further advice. If your RSI can be shown to be work related you will have a good case for claiming compensation from your employer. It is essential that you have advice from your shop steward with regard to informing your employer about your injury. An entry should be made in the work place accident book and any approach to your employer should be recorded in writing.

**More and more AEEU members are working with VDUs. This work can lead to a range of health problems, from repetitive strain injury, eye sight problems and stress. The risks involved can be reduced by improving the design of your work environment. This guide explains the health risks involved, gives advice on how to reduce those risks and explains the laws that protect VDU users. If you have any concerns with regard to your work environment you should contact your health and safety representative.**

## The Law

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992 lay down broad general duties on health and safety. Your employer has a responsibility to provide a safe system of work and provide you with information and training. The Regulations require your employer to carry out risk assessments and to put into effect the necessary preventive and protective measures. In addition to this there are specific Regulations concerning visual display units (VDUs), the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992.

## minimise the risks

### Are you sitting comfortably?

- ensure you have a comfortable posture
- adjust your furniture and equipment to minimise stress and tiredness
- take regular breaks and change your activity
- prevent over reaching and avoid glare and reflections on your screen
- ensure regular cleaning and maintenance of the equipment takes place

## Posture

- relax your shoulders
- keep your wrists straight
- pull in your chin to look down rather than flop your head forward
- keep the hollow in the base of your spine
- don't slouch or slump
- alter your posture from time to time

## The right angle rule

- your feet should rest flat on the floor
- your calves should be perpendicular to the floor and to your thighs
- your thighs should be parallel to the floor
- the angle between your thighs and back should be at least 90 degrees
- your arms should hang by your side
- your forearms should project out straight in front of you
- your wrists should be straight

## The chair

The seat of the chair should tilt so that your thighs are slightly higher than your knees. The height of the seat should enable your feet to sit firmly on the floor. The chair should have a tiltable back. You should adjust the chair so you can lean back a little (about 10 degrees). The chair should take a bit of your weight. It should be stable and allow easy movement and a comfortable position. A footrest should be available.

## The VDU

The screen should be adjustable horizontally and vertically; it should be placed at a distance of 50 cm from your eyes and at a 20-degree downward angle. There should be no glare or reflections on the screen and the image on the screen should be stable with adjustable brightness and contrast. The keyboard should be separate from the screen and tilt. The space in front

of the keyboard should be large enough to provide support for the hands.

## The environment

Sources of light such as windows should be fitted with blinds if required to prevent reflections or glare on the screen. Electromagnetic radiation emission should be reduced to negligible levels; you should take particular care if you are pregnant. Heat and noise from the equipment should not be in excess to cause discomfort or distract attention.

## Typing

- your wrists should be in a straight line with your forearms and should not be bent up or downwards. Don't rest your wrists on a wrist pad while typing.
- use a light touch on the keys.
- hold the mouse lightly.
- keep your arms and hands warm.
- take breaks in your typing.
- don't rest the telephone receiver between your shoulder and your ear while typing.

## Breaks

The Health and Safety Executive Regulations for working with VDUs state that the employer must plan work activities so that, 'daily work on display screen equipment is periodically interrupted by such breaks or changes of activity as reduce their workload at that equipment.' The HSE has also produced guidance that stresses the importance of these breaks, it states;

- breaks should be taken before the onset of fatigue, not in order to recuperate
- breaks should be included in working time
- short breaks of 5-10 minutes every 50-60 minutes are more satisfactory than occasional longer breaks
- breaks should be taken away from the screen where possible