Office of Compliance
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advancing safety, health, and workplace rights in the legislative branch
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Common Office Hazards

Small Changes Can Reduce Big Hazards

Workplace Safety Issues Affect Everyone

Look around your office. Do you see many potential safety and health hazards? Like most of the 30,000 or more Legislative Branch employees, you probably do not think that your workplace has any serious safety risks. How dangerous can a photocopier be, after all?

Contrary to popular belief, every workplace has potential hazards, and many hazards are caused by very ordinary items commonly found in most offices. For example, did you know that damaged wires, plugs, and improperly used extension cords resulted in 6,900 fires and $115.9 million in direct property damage between 1994 and 1998? (Source: National Fire Protection Association)

The Congressional Accountability Act (CAA) requires that the General Counsel of the Office of Compliance conduct an inspection of all Congressional facilities in order to ensure that Congress is in compliance with the Occupational Safety and Health Act and its standards. The General Counsel is conducting the 4th of these biennial inspections, which cover 14 million square feet of office space and facilities – everything from House and Senate offices to Library of Congress storage facilities. Hundreds of workplace hazards are usually identified for correction in these inspections, many of which involve very ordinary everyday situations that can be easily corrected or avoided.

The following is a selection of some of the hazards most frequently found by the Office of Compliance during the recent inspections. Avoiding these potential problems in the workplace helps ensure that you, your coworkers, and Congress stay much safer.

Common Hazards Hit List

Blocking Sprinkler Heads: Sprinklers are an essential and effective means of fire protection for people and buildings. Often, however, furniture and stacked items are placed near or around sprinkler heads, blocking the range of the sprinkler and greatly reducing its effectiveness. Nothing should ever be placed any higher than 18 inches below a sprinkler or positioned in such a way as to block a sprinkler's full range of coverage.

Damaged Power Cords: Damaged and ungrounded cords pose a threat of electric shock to employees, can present a fire hazard, and are a violation of safety codes. To minimize risks, inspect cords regularly for wear, and never use a power cord with damaged external sheathing or exposed wires. Never use plugs when the third prong, used to ground the plug, has been damaged or removed.

Improper Storage of Heavy Items: Large stacks of materials and/or heavy articles can pose a great safety risk to employees if they fall or are knocked over. Heavy items should always be stored close to the floor, and care should be taken never to exceed the safe load capacity of shelving or storage units.

Misused Extension Cords: Improper use of unapproved extension cords can present a serious fire safety hazard in the workplace. The most common cause of fires from extension cords is improper use and/or overloading. Extension cords in the workplace should always be properly approved by a certifying laboratory (such as UL), used only temporarily, and used to connect only one device at a time.

No Emergency Action Plan: Emergency Action Plans, or "EAPs," describe how to safely evacuate in an emergency, where to gather after evacuation, and who should perform certain critical functions. All employing offices in Congress, including committees and personal offices of Members, are required by law to have an EAP and to ensure that staff are familiar with it.

Opened Fire Doors: Holding fire doors open by unapproved means is a significant fire hazard. Fire doors are fundamental to the integrity of fire barriers, which are used to separate spaces to prevent the spread of fire in buildings. Fire doors can be held open, but only if they automatically close when the building's fire alarm is activated.

Unsafe Space Heaters: Portable space heaters can pose a major fire hazard if used improperly. Space heaters in the workplace should always be approved for commercial use by a recognized safety testing laboratory, never placed near combustible materials, and have a tip-over switch to ensure they will turn off automatically if knocked over. Space heaters should also never be used with extension cords.

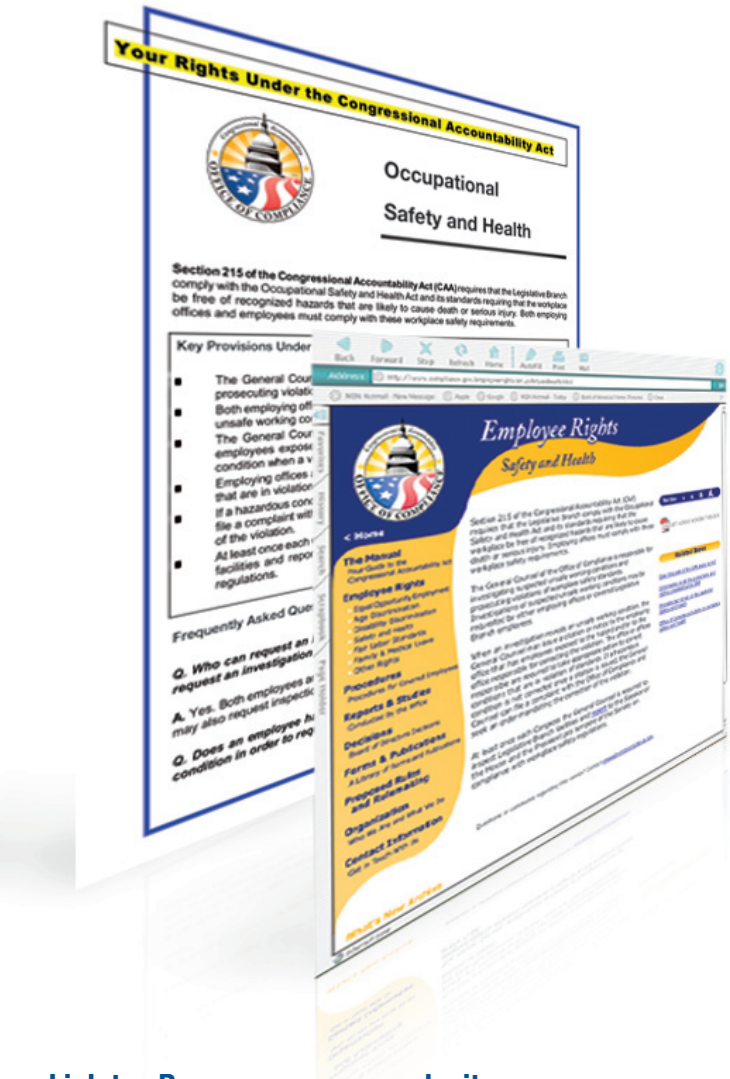
Want More Information?

More detailed information on these hazards and how to avoid them can be found in our new series of publications, ***Safety and Health Fast Facts***. This new product is devoted exclusively to providing information on common office safety hazards.

Safety and Health Fast Facts, as well as other useful tools and publications, can be found in the eResources section of our web site, *www.compliance.gov*.

If you have questions about any of this information or want to speak with a safety and health expert directly, please contact the Office of Compliance.

Download all of our Safety and Health Fast Facts. Visit eResources at *www.compliance.gov*.



Link to eResources on our web site:

http://www.compliance.gov/forms-pubs/forms-pubs.html#eresources

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The Office of Compliance advances safety, health, and workplace rights in the U.S. Congress and the Legislative Branch. Established as an independent agency by the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995, the Office educates employees and employing offices about their rights and responsibilities under the Act, provides an impartial dispute resolution process, and investigates and remedies violations of the Act.

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