

REST BREAKS FOR COMPUTER OPERATORS

Hazard Summary:

People who do continuous, intensive computer work, such as data entry, for prolonged periods during a shift are at increased risk of developing a number of health problems. These include: visual fatigue, headaches, upper limb musculoskeletal injuries (e.g., carpal tunnel syndrome), and back pain.

Suggested Precautions:

The risk of computer related health problems can be reduced by: appropriate work station design (e.g., suitable desks and adjustable chairs), proper lighting (e.g., appropriate illuminance and elimination of glare sources), training, and the use of suitable equipment (e.g., monitors of a suitable size for the task and workstation). Further information on these issues can be found in the Canadian Standards Association's *Guideline on Office Ergonomics (Z412-00)* or in the Ministry of Labour guideline, *Computer Ergonomics: Workstation Layout and Lighting* dated September 2004.

Where the computer work is intensive, (**i.e., continuous keyboarding for an hour or longer, uninterrupted by other activities**), good work station design should be augmented by having the operator take a 5-minute break away from computer operation in each hour. In facilities governed by the Regulation for Health Care and Residential Facilities, this is required by section 24. Although the duration and frequency of computer rest breaks are not specified in the regulations for other sectors, employers do have the general duty to take every reasonable precaution in the circumstances for the protection of workers under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. In those situations, taking a 5-minute break away from intensive computer operation in each hour is encouraged as a good practice and it is open to inspectors to consider that this represents a reasonable precaution to protect the health and safety of workers.

The 5-minute breaks should not be accumulated. This is because short, frequent breaks are much more effective in preventing excessive fatigue and possible injury than longer, less frequent breaks.

At management's discretion, the 5-minute break can mean a period of other work, not involving a computer, or a full break during which the operator does no work. Ideally, the alternate work should be as dissimilar from computer work as possible. The 5-minute pause after 55 minutes of continuous work may also be counted as a part of a regular meal or other break. For example, an operator may work from 11:05 until noon and then take a regularly scheduled half-hour lunch break. The necessary 5 minutes away from computer work is provided within the 30 minutes of the lunch break.

On the other hand, if the operator started continuous computer work at 8:00, he or she should stop at 8:55 and, at management's discretion, would either have a 5-minute break from work or spend 5 minutes performing another task not using a computer.

Further information regarding computer rest breaks and office ergonomics generally can be obtained from the Ministry Ergonomics Consultant in your area, or via the Ministry of Labour website: www.labour.gov.on.ca.