

# Computer safety

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Using a computer is not generally thought of as being one of the most hazardous activities to engage in. Yet health and safety risks do exist for both adults and children.

## Physical hazards

Accidents involving computers are increasing year after year as more people use computers both at work and at home. In 1998 around 1500 people in the UK went to hospital as a result of an accident in the home involving a computer<sup>1</sup>. To give some examples:

- a 6-year-old boy suffered burns after a fire caused by spilling a drink on a computer
- a 9-year-old boy suffered a head injury after a computer stored on top of a wardrobe fell on him
- a 9-year-old girl was treated for bruising after falling down the stairs while attempting to move her computer
- a 15-year-old boy needed treatment for cuts after he threw his arms up in the air after winning a computer game and then brought his arm down on a glass on the desk
- an 18-year-old man suffered the effects of an electric shock whilst setting up his computer
- a 38-year-old man suffered a sprained wrist after playing computer games for five hours

Computers should not be seen as toys but as items of electrical equipment to be treated with respect.

## Tips to minimise the risk of a computer-related accident

- site your computer near an electric socket to avoid trailing wires across the floor; if you use an extension cable make sure it doesn't overheat and nobody can trip over it
- take care not to overload electric sockets; use trailing multi-socket units rather than plug adapters
- always follow installation and service instructions in your computer guidebook closely. If in doubt, leave it to the experts
- electricity and water do not mix – keep drinks and plants well away from computers
- regularly check all electrical equipment for damaged plugs or frayed cables
- computers are large and bulky pieces of equipment, move them only if you feel confident in doing so, and with care, especially up and down

- stairs. Use a trolley and a lift and ask for help. Do not allow children to move computers
- do not allow children to play on or with computer swivel chairs
- make sure the computer is sited in a position where you have plenty of room to move and to get out of the room in an emergency

## Health risks

There are a number of health risks from using computers, most of which can be minimised or eliminated by awareness of the risks and by following advice available.

### *Repetitive strain injury (RSI)*

RSI results from performing repetitive movements, e.g. using the mouse, for a long period of time. The following tips are among many that will help you to avoid RSI:

- organise workloads to avoid using the computer for extended periods of time
- your screen, keyboard and mouse should be directly in front of you
- using document holders avoids having to lean over and bend your neck while looking at paperwork
- make sure the space underneath your desk is free from clutter and your legs have room to move
- use your mouse as close to the keyboard as possible
- adopt good posture while at the computer
- know how to adjust your chair to the most comfortable position
- minimise head and neck movements by altering the height of your monitor
- small people and children should use footrests
- wrist rests are not for use while typing, but for resting the wrists between spells of typing

### *Strained eyes*

Working for long periods of time on the computer can strain your eyes or can worsen existing eye conditions. Symptoms include eye discomfort, headaches, itchy eyes and difficulty in focusing. It is important to rest the eyes while working on the computer. Regularly look at more distant objects, e.g. use thinking time to look out of the window, and take frequent breaks from computer work. Visit the

optician for regular eye check-ups and make sure you tell them if you are a frequent computer user.

### *Stress*

Computer work can be stressful. Take frequent breaks and avoid work overload.

### *Epilepsy*

Although this is a small risk, epileptic seizures can be triggered by computer work, usually through excessive screen flicker. Know what to do if a child has an epileptic seizure.

Further information is available from the National Society for Epilepsy, 01494 601300, <http://www.epilepsyse.org.uk>.

*For further information on safe and comfortable computer use refer to '14 steps to safe and comfortable computer use – the practical ergonomics approach' by Robert Down of Ergonomos Limited, ISBN 0-9539071-0-4.*

### **Internet safety/child protection**

While the Internet serves as a wonderful educational tool, it is an unregulated one, and teachers, parents and children should be aware of the inherent dangers of using the Internet. Caution needs to be exercised

to ensure that children do not access unsuitable adult material on the Internet:

- home/school Internet contracts should be in place
- preview Internet material to be used for school-work
- computers should be placed in public areas and screen content should be visible to everyone
- teach children how to use the Internet safely and warn them of the potential dangers of unsuitable sites and chatrooms
- advise children never to give out personal details on the Internet
- have clear penalties in place for misuse of the Internet
- monitor children's time spent on-line
- purchase filtering software

Many schools now have their own website. Within the school website ensure that no individual child could be identified and subsequently contacted by visitors to the site.

*For further information on Internet Safety refer to the DfEE's 'Superhighway Safety Information Pack' – <http://safety.ngfl.gov.uk>*

*For advice for children, parents and teachers concerning using the Internet safely, go to Childnet – <http://www.childnet-int.org/>.*

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<sup>1</sup>Home Accident Surveillance System, 1998, Department of Trade and Industry.