

911 DISPATCHERS

Helping Others Shouldn't Hurt You

INSIDE:

- Causes and Symptoms of Injuries
- Ways to Work Safely



Poor workstation design and equipment can cause pain and injuries.



A workstation design and equipment that help to prevent injuries.

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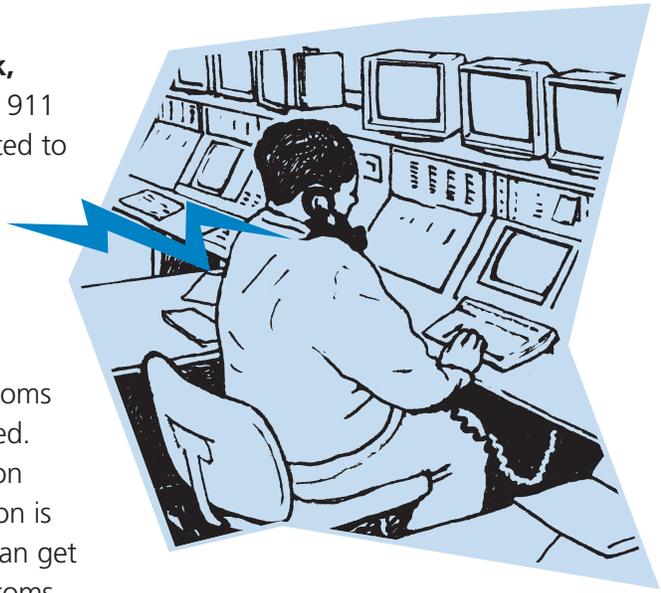
California Department of Public Health • California Department of Industrial Relations

Is Your Job Causing You Pain?

▶ **Pain, numbness or tingling in the neck, shoulders, back and wrists** affect many 911 dispatchers. These symptoms may be related to your job.

▶ **Symptoms may start gradually.** Many workers try to ignore them at first. However, if ignored, symptoms can get worse and become harder to treat. Symptoms may occur at night and still be work-related. Even if they go away during vacation, or on your days off, it doesn't mean the condition is gone. Inform your employer so that you can get medical care right away if you have symptoms.

▶ **These symptoms may indicate serious injuries** and may interfere with your work and personal activities. They can even lead to permanent disability.



Why Do 911 Dispatchers Have These Problems?

▶ **Uncomfortable and unsafe work positions** can be caused by the design of the workstation and the type of equipment you use. Cradling phone handsets between your ear and shoulder, looking up to see multiple monitors, sitting in non-adjustable chairs without back support, and reaching to write, touch screens, or key in data can lead to pain and injury.

▶ **Repeated and forceful motions** such as gripping equipment, pushing buttons, twisting to answer phones, moving a mouse, looking back and forth between the screen and paperwork—over and over, all day long—can injure muscles, tendons, and joints.

▶ **Multiple tasks performed constantly and quickly** like looking at several screens at once while typing, mousing, and reaching for a phone, can be stressful and can make it difficult to find a comfortable work position.

▶ **Long work hours in a fast-paced, high stress work environment** mean less time for muscles and joints to recover. There is less time to release stress and recover from being physically and mentally tired.

How Can Injuries Be Prevented?

By law, your employer is responsible for providing a safe and healthful workplace. Here are some things your employer and you can do to prevent injuries.

- ▶ **Talk with others at work.** Do workers have symptoms? Are the causes of injury present? Does the employer know about preventive actions to take?
- ▶ **Provide a workstation designed to prevent injuries.** An experienced ergonomist can help. Consider the following recommendations:
 - **Install an adjustable console with a U-shape** that allows separate and easy adjustment of the worksurface, keyboard/mouse trays, and monitor platforms. Dispatchers should be able to alternate between standing and sitting while working.
 - **Choose an appropriate monitor setup.** Use software that requires the fewest monitors. Position monitors so screens are slightly below eye level, 18 to 20 inches from dispatchers, and easy to read. Screen size should be between 17 and 21 inches. Screens should be glare-free.
 - **Use an adjustable headset with combined radio and telephone functions** instead of a hand-held phone headset. This will prevent forceful gripping or “cradling.”
 - **Use adjustable chairs** with padded seats and backrests (see page 5). The swivel base should have five legs (not four).
 - **Use a variety of input devices** such as headsets, “push to talk” buttons with speakers, mice, keyboards, and touch screens to transmit data. This helps to avoid overuse of any one muscle group.



- ▶ **Train dispatchers and supervisors** to adjust and use equipment, work safely, and recognize early symptoms of injury.
- ▶ **Take regular breaks and reduce stress.** Use exercise rooms, take walks, or stretch. Put soothing decorations and plants in the work area.
- ▶ **Increase staffing to reduce the need for overtime.**

Taking Action to Prevent Injuries

- ▶ **Form a safety committee.** It can be a big help in keeping your workplace safe. Get key people from both labor and management to participate. A successful committee is one that has strong employer support. An experienced ergonomic consultant can provide technical assistance. Here's what a safety committee can do:
 - Talk to workers and inspect jobs to find conditions that can cause injuries.
 - Encourage workers to report work-related injuries and symptoms to their supervisor.
 - Identify the jobs that have caused injuries.
 - Figure out how particular jobs may be causing injuries.
 - Develop practical solutions and recommend that management try them out on a few individuals.
 - Check to see if the changes are effective before recommending them for all affected jobs.
 - Monitor employees using new equipment and/or making other job changes.

What Does the Law Say?

- ▶ **Your employer may have to follow a California rule about repetitive work. Find out:**
 - Were two or more workers injured within the last 12 months? The injured workers must have done the same type of work.
 - Did a doctor report that each injury is mainly caused by the job? Each worker can have a different diagnosis, as long as it's related to the same kind of repetitive work.
- ▶ **If the answer to both questions is "Yes," the employer must change the work or equipment to prevent injuries.** Worker training also is required.

This rule is called Repetitive Motion Injuries (General Industry Safety Order 5110). It is enforced by Cal/OSHA.

What is Cal/OSHA? It is California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health. This government agency investigates workers' complaints and answers questions about workplace safety rules. Complaints are confidential. Find the phone number in the blue Government Pages near the front of the phone book. Look under: State of California, Industrial Relations, Division of Occupational Safety and Health, Compliance or Enforcement.

For employers, California has the Consultation Service (**1-800-963-9424**). This agency explains workplace health and safety regulations, and helps employers comply with them. They do not cite or impose fines.

How to Adjust Your Workstation to Fit Your Body

- ▶ **Make your chair support your body.** If you can adjust it to a comfortable position, many injuries can be prevented.
- ▶ **Make sure chairs are the appropriate sizes.** A chair may be too large or too small for a particular dispatcher no matter how you adjust it.
- ▶ **Team up with a buddy.** Help each other adjust your workstations. It's easy to see another person's position. It's hard to see your own!

1 Adjust your chair seat height first so your feet are comfortably on the floor. The upper leg should be level, or the knee a bit lower than the hip.

2 Check the chair seat tilt. The seat should be level, or tilted forward (higher in the back) if you prefer.

3 Move your hips back in the chair.

4 Adjust the back rest to support your lower back. Back rests usually adjust up and down as well as forward and back.

5 Next, adjust the worksurface, keyboard and mouse pad height for the comfort of your wrists, arms, neck and shoulders.

- Wrists straight
- Elbows close to your body
- Shoulders relaxed

6 Adjust the monitor heights. The top of each screen should be at your eye level. Your head should be balanced, not tipped back or bent over.

7 Arrange input devices within easy reach.

For More Information...

- ▶ **HESIS (Hazard Evaluation System and Information Service)** (www.cdph.ca.gov/hesis) Answers questions about workplace hazards and has many free publications available.

For information on workplace hazards: **(866) 282-5516**. Please leave a message and your call will be returned.

For HESIS Publications: **(866) 627-1586**

- *Guide to Getting Medical Care for Job-Related Pain That Won't Go Away*. Helps workers recognize symptoms that need treatment; choose a doctor; and work with health care providers, employers, and the workers' compensation system.
- *Physician's Guide to the California Ergonomics Standard*. Helps healthcare providers identify, document and treat work-related musculoskeletal disorders.
- *HESIS Publications List*. Pamphlets and fact sheets on workplace hazards including chemicals, repetitive motion, and infectious diseases. Visit our website, call or write for the list.

- ▶ **Workers' Compensation**. If you are injured on the job, or work makes an existing injury worse, you may have a right to receive benefits such as medical care, wage replacement and retraining (if a job change is needed). Benefits are available to all workers, including immigrants, part-time and temporary workers. Call **1-800-736-7401** for more information and for free factsheets, in English and Spanish.

- ▶ **Cal/OSHA Consultation Service**. Helps employers to improve safety and health conditions without triggering enforcement inspections. Call **1-800-963-9424** for assistance and for *Easy Ergonomics* and other materials.

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The recommendations in this fact sheet were developed by HESIS based on observed practices and general ergonomic principles. They may not be appropriate for every 911 dispatch center or individual dispatcher.

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