



# Health and Safety in **CALL CENTRES**



BRITAIN'S GENERAL UNION

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**W**hether it's ordering an item of clothing from a catalogue, booking your holiday, or arranging breakdown cover for your car, the voice on the other end of the phone will be that of a call centre worker. This hidden and often forgotten workforce behind the recent technological revolution is exposed to a range of health and safety hazards.

More than 1% of the UK's workforce currently works in call centres and this figure is predicted to grow. On the whole call centre workers tend to be young women, many of whom go home to the unpaid work of caring for a child and a home.

The GMB, Britain's General Union, wants to work together with responsible employers to improve the health and safety conditions for call centre workers and ensure that all GMB members are safe at work. The GMB has 25,000 workplace Safety Representatives committed to preventing accidents and ill health. The GMB is also campaigning to improve health and safety for call centre workers. If you are not yet a member of the GMB - join today.

This leaflet aims to identify the health and safety hazards that call centre workers can be exposed to and how the risks of injury and ill health can be reduced. The leaflet also outlines the legal rights of call centre workers.

## **The Health and Safety Issues for Call Centre Workers**

### **Visual Display Units (VDUs)**

Call centre work usually involves spending long spells seated in front of a VDU screen reading and inputting data. Workers who spend long periods of time working on VDUs can experience the following health problems:

- Headaches and eye strain - from glare on the screen or unsuitable lighting and long spells concentrating on the screen
- Back, shoulder and neck pain - from poor seating and cramped/poorly designed workstations
- Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) - affecting the fingers, wrists and arms. It can range from pins and needles to numbness and shooting pains caused by poorly designed or poorly positioned workstations and intensive keyboard or mouse work.

In order to prevent these problems your employer should carry out a risk assessment on the workstations in your office. Your employer should be trained to carry out these assessments or if not, should employ someone who is trained. The assessments should take into account a number of issues including: whether VDUs are well positioned away from sources of glare; work chairs are fully adjustable; whether there is adequate space; comfortable temperature and lighting; and that computer screens and keyboards can be adjusted.

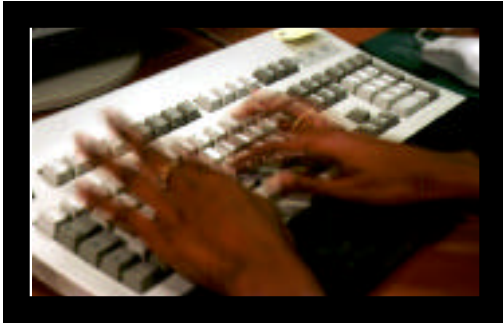
Training and advice on issues such as how to adjust your workstation should be provided to all staff who regularly use VDUs.

If you regularly use VDUs you are also entitled to a free eyesight test. Your employer should pay for this test and, if the test indicates it necessary, pay for at least part of the cost for suitable glasses.

### **Rest Breaks**

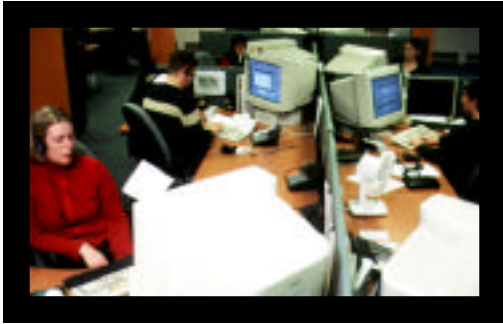
Many call centre workers find themselves forced to take a set amount of calls during their shift. Some calls can take a long time to deal with putting workers behind their "targets". These work pressures may lead to rest breaks being missed. Rest breaks are of utmost importance to call centre workers in preventing RSI, eyestrain and stress. They also give workers a chance to socialise with their colleagues, which is important in demanding jobs. There is also evidence to suggest that missing toilet breaks can lead to bladder infections and long term kidney damage.

The Working Time Regulations guarantees a minimum rest break of 20 minutes for every 6 hour shift that is worked, however VDU workers should be given more regular breaks away from the VDU. The GMB recommends that VDU workers should either take a break or transfer to another type of work for at least 10 minutes every hour. There should also be provision for regular toilet breaks as and when needed.



***“Every aspect of the job is monitored. Statistics are produced for the time you’re not on the phone, toilet breaks and how long you spend talking to managers.”***

*A 29 year old customer service advisor working in a call centre who wishes to remain anonymous.  
(Taken from TUC/RNID survey)*



The GMB believes that stress is like any other hazard in the workplace and that the causes of stress need to be identified and eliminated or, where this is not possible, controlled. This can be done in a number of ways including regular rest breaks, having good communication and consultation procedures e.g. a health and safety committee, flexible working patterns and training staff to deal with stressful situations such as aggressive callers. The employer should also have a stress policy, which recognises stress as a health and safety issue.

### **Noise**

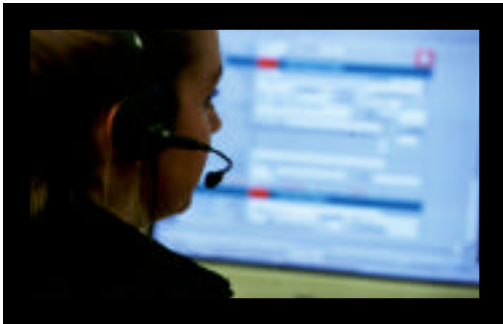
Noise isn't just a hazard for factory workers using heavy machinery. A survey on noise at work carried out by the TUC and The Royal National Institute for Deaf People found that noise and hearing damage was a problem in call centres. Out of the 64 call centre workers that replied 39% were concerned that their hearing was being damaged as a result of exposure to noise at work. More than a quarter said there were sometimes sudden loud bursts of noise through headphones and several went home with a dullness of hearing after work. With some call centres having 100 or more workers in one room background noise is also a problem

The GMB would like to see further research into the area of noise in call centres and in the meantime is calling on employers to identify sources of either high pitched noise or background noise and take measures to reduce noise levels. Where noise is identified as a hazard workers should be offered hearing tests.

### **Voice Loss**

Anyone whose job involves talking for long periods can be at risk of developing occupational voice loss, which is usually temporary but can lead to long term problems. Losing your voice is not just the inconvenient and disrupting it can also be uncomfortable and painful with soreness, dryness and an irritating cough.

Regular rest breaks will help prevent voice loss. In addition the office environment should be comfortable and not too dry - air conditioning units should provide an adequate supply of fresh air. The employer should also supply drinking water free of charge.



### **Stress**

Call centre work is demanding and requires a high level of concentration as workers listen to calls whilst simultaneously typing onto a VDU screen. It can also be highly repetitive with workers repeating the same dialogue to each caller, often with little or no room for the call worker to use their own initiative. Meeting targets and dealing with a queue of callers can also lead to excessive pressure, as can the monitoring and recording of calls. Recognised causes of workplace stress, known as stressors, include: boring or repetitive work; too much to do in too little time; lack of control over work activities; inflexible work schedules; work with the public; long and antisocial hours; and lack of communication and consultation. Call workers are clearly at risk of becoming ill through stress and some are forced to leave work after only a few months in the job due to “burnout”. Workplace stress coupled with a demanding home life can double the burden on working parents.

## YOUR RIGHTS

Your employer has a legal duty to safeguard your health, safety and welfare whilst you are at work. Under health and safety law your employer must:

- Carry out risk assessments - this means your employer must investigate your workplace and note anything which could cause injury or ill health to you or one of your colleagues e.g. trailing wires, glare on computer screens, noise. Your employer must then eliminate or reduce the likelihood of that injury as far as they reasonably can.
- Consult with you and GMB Safety Representatives over a range of health and safety issues.
- Provide free eye tests for regular VDU users.
- If the eye test indicates that special glasses are needed contribute to the cost of any spectacles necessary for VDU work.
- Give you training and information on health and safety issues in your workplace.
- Provide regular breaks or changes in work activity for frequent users of VDUs.
- Provide a minimum rest break of 20 minutes for every six-hour shift.
- Provide a supply of drinking water and an adequate number of clean toilets.

## HOW THE GMB CAN HELP

Independent research has shown that people who are in a trade union are **50% LESS LIKELY TO HAVE AN ACCIDENT** than those who are not in a trade union.

<i>Union/non union</i>	<i>Injury Rate</i>	<i>Actual injuries in one year</i>
<b>Trade Union Recognised</b>	5.3	58,300
<b>No Trade Union Recognised</b>	10.9	181,500

Source: Reilly, Paci and Hall; British Journal of Industrial Relations, 33:2, June 1995

In other words:

## YOU ARE TWICE AS SAFE IN THE GMB

The GMB is Britain's leading union for health and safety. In each of our Regions we have a specialist Health and Safety Officer who can offer advice and help to make your workplace safer. The union also has a National Health and Safety Department with 4 staff to back up the Regions. **JOIN THE GMB NOW!!**



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General Secretary John Edmonds

Call Centre staff  
are safer in **THE GMB!**

