

EYE TESTS & VDUs



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IS THERE A PROBLEM?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) states that there is no reliable evidence that display screen equipment (DSE) work causes any permanent damage to the eyes or eyesight, but it may make those with pre-existing vision defects more aware of them. If these are not corrected, temporary visual fatigue and headaches may occur.

However, there is mounting evidence which suggests that visual display units (VDUs) may cause actual eye damage. For example in America and Japan, temporary visual impairment is officially recognised as an occupational health problem.

In Denmark the Association of Computer Professionals has concluded that many screen-based workers become short-sighted. They believe that this is due to the eyes focusing at the same distance for too many hours.

Out of 6 million VDU 'users' in the UK, only one in five have exercised their legal right to an eye test paid for by their employer. Many are not aware of their entitlement. Some employers are also confused about who is entitled. Others try to avoid the costs of complying with the law.

WHO IS A 'USER'?

Regulation 1 of the DSE Regulations states that a 'user' is:

“an employee who habitually uses... [DSE] as a significant part of his [or her] normal work.”

A 'user' may work from home. Some 'users' will be obvious. Where they are not obvious, criteria in the Guidance to the Regulations will assist in identifying them. If most or all of the following criteria are met, the employee is a 'user':

- DSE is necessary for the job, as alternative means are not readily available
- there is no choice over the use of DSE
- significant training and/or specific skills in the use of the DSE are required
- the employee normally uses DSE for continuous spells of an hour or more at a time
- DSE is used more or less daily
- the fast transfer of information between the employee and screen is an important requirement of the job
- the performance requirements of the system demand high levels of attention and concentration by the user, for example, where the conse-

quence of error may be critical

In practice, if a number of employees use the same DSE, or if use of the equipment is vital for the job, employers will find it easier to designate all employees who use DSE as 'users'.

Examples of 'users' given in the Guidance include: secretaries; data input operators, community care workers, librarians, scientists, secretaries, telephone operators, and receptionists.

WHAT IS 'DISPLAY SCREEN EQUIPMENT'?

Regulation 1 defines DSE not only as visual display units (VDUs), that is computers, but also microfiche readers, and control screens.

It does not include: screens whose main use is to show television or film pictures, screens on board a means of transport or mainly intended for public use, window typewriters with just a few lines of text, equipment with a small measurement display such as calculators or cash registers, or portable systems unless they are in prolonged use.

YOUR RIGHT TO AN EYE AND EYESIGHT TEST

Regulation 5 requires employers to provide, on request, an appropriate eye and eyesight test for 'users' or those who will shortly become 'users'. The employer may specify where the test is to be taken, but branches may wish to negotiate for the employer to make a reasonable payment where an individual chooses to go elsewhere.

In particular, where an individual has specialist needs the optician chosen by the employer may not be able to carry out the appropriate tests. Individuals who already have a problem should see a specialist with the branch ensuring that the cost is met by the employer.

All eye and eyesight tests must be:

- carried out by a competent person,

either a doctor or optician with ophthalmic qualifications

- carried out as soon as practicable after being requested where the employee is already a 'user', and where not already a 'user' before the employee becomes a 'user'
- without cost to the employee

'Users' should be provided with tests at regular intervals, but cannot be compelled to take one. The optician or doctor will be able to advise how frequently these tests should be. It may vary between individuals.

Employers must also provide, on request, tests for users who experience visual difficulties, which may reasonably be considered to be related to DSE work, for example headaches, eyestrain, or difficulty in focussing.

Regulation 7 requires employers to ensure that all DSE 'users' are aware of their right to ask for a free eye test. But note that employees must request eye and eyesight tests.

There is no requirement for employers to provide them automatically. UNISON believes that employers should allow paid time off to attend these tests during working hours.

Vision Screening Tests

Vision screening tests such as 'keystone' tests are not full eyesight tests. Whilst they identify individuals with defective vision who require a full sight test, they do not screen for eye defects, such as injury or disease which have not yet begun to affect vision. They do not fulfil the requirements of the regulations, and 'users' who request a full test must be given one.

THE COST OF GLASSES

If the test results show that glasses are needed for DSE work, employers must pay the cost of these corrective appliances. Employers often claim that they only need to make a payment where the glasses are required "solely" for DSE work.



This is not in accordance with either the wording or the spirit of the regulations and branches should ensure that the cost is met even if the glasses are also going to be used for general reading purposes, where they are also required for DSE work. The employer may specify where 'special' corrective appliances are purchased.

The regulations also state that the employer need only meet the cost of a basic adequate pair. If 'users' want more expensive pairs or optional treatments, the employer need only provide a basic pair or it may choose to part pay for a more expensive pair, but only to the value of a basic pair. Branches should try to ensure however, that the employers contribution is sufficient for a reasonable set of glasses, not the absolute minimum.

REST BREAKS

Taking regular breaks away from DSE work is also important for relaxing the eyes. Regulation 4 requires employers to plan the activities of 'users' so that their DSE work is periodically interrupted by breaks or changes of activity.

The more intensive the work, the more frequently breaks are required. Where possible, 'users' should be allowed to take breaks when they need them. Where this is not possible, or unlikely due to pressure of work, an agreement on DSE work breaks should be drawn up.

The Guidance to the Regulations says that breaks should be taken before the onset of fatigue, not in order to recuperate, and when performance is at a maximum.

Taking breaks should not mean that the same amount of work needs to be done in less time. Short frequent breaks are preferable to longer occasional breaks, and if possible they should be taken away from the screen.

Studies seem to suggest that changes of work activity, rather than formal rest breaks are more effective in relieving eye strain. Of course, this fact should have no

detrimental affect on formal tea breaks.

OTHER DUTIES

They are not covered by this information sheet, but employers are also legally required: to assess and reduce risks of DSE work, to ensure that workstations meet minimum requirements, and to provide training and information.

WHAT SHOULD THE BRANCH DO?

Make sure that all DSE 'users' know about their right to eye and eyesight tests.

Request a schedule of those members that are tested from the employer and ensure that all members who should be included, are on that list.

Use the law to insist on eye and eye sight tests, and spectacles for all VDU 'users', and to press employers into taking a common sense approach by providing the same entitlements to all employees who use VDUs, not just 'users'.

UNISON believes that anyone working with DSE (not just regular 'users') should have:

regular eye tests by qualified opticians, which are paid for by their employer, and with paid time off to attend during working hours.

If a test shows that they need corrective spectacles, then the employer should meet reasonable costs. Good employers will provide for this, whether they have to or not; and branches may wish to negotiate for this.

