

A Clear Vision of Safety Starts at the Top

Despite their small size, our eyes are pretty big targets when it comes to workplace injuries. Every day, 2,000 Americans suffer eye injuries on the job, resulting in about 27,000 days away from work. When you factor in medical bills and compensation costs on top of all this downtime, eye injuries end up costing employers \$300 million a year.

Given these staggering numbers, it's clear that many organizations could stand to benefit from improving their approach to eye safety. And there's no better time to start than the present.

However, in order for any real sort of change to take root, it needs to start at the top. Here, we'll outline the right kind of eye safety planning to implement and why it's up to employers to implement it. Both the health and well-being of employees—and your bottom line—are on the line.

DEVELOP A PREDICTIVE PLAN TO PROMOTE EYE SAFETY

The good news is that 90% of all eye injuries are preventable, but leaders must make eye safety a priority in order to keep incidents at bay. Far too many organizations take a reactive approach to safety. When accidents occur, they come in and quickly clean them up, care for injured workers and find replacement personnel without missing a beat. But no matter how refined this reactionary response may be, it won't prevent such incidents from happening again in the future.

Leaders of best-in-class safety operations are keenly aware of this difference. They know that ensuring employee safety isn't about applying bandages to wounds, it's about identifying the factors that lead to wounds in the first place and eliminating them from the workplace—effective immediately.

That's what a predictive safety plan can help you account for. By staying closely connected to the behaviors and work practices that create a safe work environment, as well as examining past data to help predict future accidents, leaders can institute controls throughout their worksites to address risk factors. For accidents as prevalent as those related to the eyes, taking a predictive approach to planning is key—simply reacting is not enough to make any sort of significant dent in your incident rate.

WHAT TO INCORPORATE INTO YOUR PREDICTIVE PLAN

Manufacturing and construction are two of the three sectors together that account for 61% of all workplace eye injuries, so maintaining safe work practices among other competing priorities is a must. An effective job-hazard analysis of potential eye hazards will consider prevention methods, such as engineering controls, that increase reliability in protection while reducing risk and severity. This is recommended for new positions or processes, when new risks or changes occur, or at least twice a year (aligned with overall safety planning). Higher risk locations with greater levels of risk exposure to eye-related injuries could require this more often.

Before you start developing a predictive plan, familiarize yourself with the risk factors that are unique to your work environment so you know how to proceed. For manufacturing and construction sites, flying particles tend to be the most common culprit of workplace eye injuries; so, addressing them in your plan will go a long way toward reducing ocular incidents.

Workers whose jobs involve any kind of hammering, drilling, welding, or grinding are particularly at risk, as these activities send sparks, dust and other sharp fragments into the air. Even actions as seemingly innocuous as spraying and sanding can still place workers at risk of eye injury, so plan

to enforce proper eye protection at all times.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT EYE PROTECTION

All eyewear is not created equal, however. While goggles will suffice when working with hazardous chemicals, tasks such as welding will require headwear with side shielding and face protection to stave off sparks. There are regulations to follow regarding eye safety, like what constitutes proper eyewear and where to place your eyewash stations, and consulting them can help you develop an all-encompassing eye safety strategy. A true and complete predictive plan must also account for the individual needs of your workplace and staff too.

Talk with employees to learn more about their habits regarding eye protection. If they're not wearing proper protective equipment at all times, why? Is it uncomfortable or making the task at hand more difficult?

In one report, researchers found that certain workers wouldn't sport their standard issue eyewear because it fogged too easily, creating its own new set of hazards; so, they recommended management provide an anti-fogging solution to remedy the situation.

If you ensure adherence to proper regulatory guidelines at all times and give yourself some room to make adjustments based on the needs of your staff, you'll have the makings of a solid plan on your hands that's capable of driving real change.

KEEPING AN EYE ON EYE SAFETY—FROM LEADERSHIP ON DOWN

Besides being the right thing to do from a health and safety standpoint, neglecting eye safety also can take a major toll on your bottom line. The more eye incidents that occur, the more employees will grow fearful that their surroundings aren't secure enough to guarantee their safety on the job. Needless to say, that's a major detriment to morale and its

close cousin, engagement.

Organizations with high levels of employee engagement were found to be 17% more productive, more profitable and much less prone to turnover. But more importantly, they reported 70% fewer safety incidents than businesses where engagement was low. Considering how expensive it is to replace an existing employee (nearly 21 times their annual salary by some estimates), neglecting your safety operations for too long can wreak havoc on your ability to maintain production and achieve peak efficiency.

With so many moving parts involved in day-to-day operations and hazards seemingly at all corners of the worksite, there's a lot to account for. That's why a centralized safety strategy that starts at the top with leadership and works its way down to all employees is the most effective way to shore up the safety of your team.

When leadership sets and communicates a clear vision, team members are more likely to follow suit. If you aren't already, start conducting regularly scheduled safety meetings with employees to ensure that care and caution stay top of mind with your team all year round. In addition, communicate your eye-safety initiative to other managers and have them spread—and more importantly, enforce—the message. With accountability shared among team leaders, eye-safety best practices stand a greater chance of becoming adopted permanently.

EVERYDAY EYE-WELLNESS PRACTICES TO FOLLOW

In addition to protecting their eyes from overt workplace hazards, make sure to communicate to your team the importance of practicing everyday eyecare to reduce strain and keep their sight sharp—both on and off the job. While most tasks likely won't involve eight straight hours of staring into a screen, televisions, computers and smartphones are a part of

everyone's day-to-day life; so, limit screen time whenever possible. For the times that you are in front of a screen, avoid sitting in darkness. The bright glare from the TV or monitor is harmful to the eyes and can cause strain. Keep your eyes fresh by blinking often and taking regular eye breaks.

For a more structured approach, try the 20-20-20 rule, which dictates looking at something 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds after every 20 minutes of uninterrupted screen time. With these suggestions in mind, along with a comprehensive on-site safety program built on sound predictive planning, you'll be well on your way to reducing eye injuries at your site. For employers concerned with not only the health and safety of their staff but the health and safety of their bottom lines, that's a goal worth setting one's sights on.

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