

SPECSAVERS CORPORATE EYECARE

Guide to DSE (display screen equipment) regulations



EYES FOCUSED ON THE JOB IN HAND

Protect staff's eyes - it's the law and makes sense

Protecting employees' eyesight against prolonged computer screen use is not only a legal requirement, it also makes good business sense. Despite this, Specsavers' research has revealed that a massive 73% of companies are not complying with Display Screen Equipment (DSE) regulations.

In the late 1980s, when DSE became widely used in the workplace, there were real concerns that radiation from the screens and monitors could damage people's eyes. In light of that, the Government of the day enacted legislation to ensure that companies took the health of their employees' eyes seriously. Extensive research has since found no evidence that DSEs can cause disease or permanent damage to eyes. However, long spells of use can lead to tired eyes and discomfort, which in turn will impact on the individual's concentration and productivity.

The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992, amended in 2002, are still in place to protect workers who regularly use computer screens. Any member of staff who uses DSE can request that their employer pays for them to have an eye examination, and glasses if they are necessary. Staff who work from home are also covered by the regulations, whether they use company computers or not. Employees who are working away, or with another firm, remain in the care of their employer. For temporary staff that

are formally employed by an outside agency, it is the latter's responsibility to provide eyecare.

Lord Young's 'common sense' approach

Supporting Lord Young's health and safety review, Specsavers Corporate Eyecare welcomes a sensible approach to health and safety in the office. The more obviously hazardous areas are likely to still be treated with caution but, while it may seem less risky in an everyday desk-job, health and safety measures in the office can do a lot to protect employees.

With increasingly long hours in front of PC screens, eyestrain and headaches can occur if eyes aren't looked after; it's not just instilling health and safety measures in the evidently-hazardous areas that benefits employees. A few basic health and safety procedures can do a lot to look after the health and wellbeing of staff at their desks; and these can include sitting at the correct distance from DSE, having the screen at the correct height and taking regular breaks from the screen. The DSE regulations have done a lot to raise awareness of looking after the eyesight of employees working with display screens and we urge employers to remember that putting a few simple health and safety policies in place can be a huge benefit to the overall health, safety and wellbeing of their staff.

Confusion

It all seems simple enough, but research has revealed that this legislation is misunderstood by both employers and employees. Specsavers carried out a comprehensive study into corporate eyecare provision during October 2009. It surveyed 187 companies representing between 295,556 and 448,629 employees. Of these firms, 43 were from the public sector, employing up to 172,513.

The results revealed that an alarming 13% of companies have no eyecare policy and 6% do not offer any company-funded eye tests to staff. This is in direct breach of the regulations that clearly state eye tests should be offered to employees who work with DSE. On the flipside, 35% of companies offer free eye tests to everyone in the company, whether they use DSE or not.

Beyond simply complying with legislation, most respondents agreed there were recruitment and retention benefits from providing corporate eyecare. Almost three-quarters (73%) thought it made them a more responsible employer and 28% felt it offered a better benefits package. The majority also understood the advantages of full eye examinations. Beyond checking your vision, a routine eye test at the opticians also provides a comprehensive health assessment. It can detect signs of a number of underlying conditions such as diabetes, glaucoma,

cataracts, high blood pressure and even life-threatening tumours. Almost two-thirds of respondents were aware of this.

Despite all this it seems amazing that 13% of companies do not have an eyecare policy at all, and 39% of their employees see it as less important than the other health benefits they receive.

How to administer the regulations in practise

The legislation is simple, and the solutions available to help businesses meet the requirements are easily accessible and cost effective.

The regulations give employers the right to nominate a specific optician to carry out the eyecare, and the tests must include a full examination of the health of the eyes, as well as just the ability to see. If any ailments are discovered the employee will be referred to an NHS practitioner for further help.

It is commonly thought that eye exams must be carried out annually. The regulations leave it to the optometrist how often they should take place, following the initial consultation. For new staff, the eye test must be done before screen work starts.

Staff are entitled to claim eye tests at any time if they feel their eyes have been damaged or strained, or if they have suffered headaches, as a consequence of VDU work. There is provision in the regulations for frivolous requests to be denied.

The regulations are clear about the minimum requirements for the provision of special corrective appliances, or glasses solely and specifically required for reading a display screen. These are distinguished from normal corrective appliances that are, quite simply, glasses that are used for anything else.

The intermediate distance for screen use is typically between 33 and 60cm. This cannot be automatically assumed however, as it is quite possible that the operator may, for example, be working with a projection screen at some distance, with a till screen at an airline check-in desk or with a wrist held computer in a stock room. The optician will need to establish this before commencing the eye test.

This is the primary consideration however, and the critical criteria is whether glasses are specifically required to view the screen clearly at this distance, and this would not be possible with the users' uncorrected vision, or using glasses already required for general day-to-day use.

Despite the exaggerated fears of many employers this is actually a very small proportion of users, usually less than 10%. Depending on the workplace demographics this can often be a lot lower, although a workforce with an average age over 40 will be particularly susceptible to presbyopia (the inability to maintain a clear image as objects are moved closer) which is an age-related condition.

There is no requirement for firms to pay for contact lenses for VDU work. The regulations also state that firms do not have an obligation to provide 'anti-glare screens' and so called 'VDU-spectacles' or any other devices that claim to protect the eyes.

One of the most confusing areas of the regulations concerns bifocals and varifocals. These lenses can be unsuitable for VDU work, as it is not always possible to see the screen clearly without lowering or raising the head, which can lead to other associated problems such as neck pain.

The basic requirement then is to provide single vision spectacles suitable for viewing a screen at the appropriate distance.

Confusion as to who should pay

Some 88% of respondents claimed to be familiar with the legislation but only 70% thought it was clear as to what employees were entitled to. The confusion becomes evident when looking at beliefs about companies funding the cost of eyecare.

The majority (53%) only make a contribution towards the costs of the eye test and glasses. Some 13% will fund the cost of the eye test but not the glasses, and 2% will pay for the glasses but not the eye test. As already stated 6% will offer no funding and insist the employee must pay for their own eye test and glasses.

In sum this means a massive 74% of companies are not complying with the DSE regulations, which clearly state that the employer must pay the full costs of an eye examination and the provision of basic glasses, where required.

Keeping costs down

As previously stated it is up to the employer to appoint the optician, and it is vitally important that they do this. By enrolling all staff with the same eye care provider - just as they would all sign up to the same medical insurance scheme - ensures that the company will get the most economical deal. The cost differences between different providers can be enormous.

The Specsavers Corporate Eyecare proposition is based on vouchers, and can provide an eye examination and complete glasses for as little as £17 per person. With other opticians offering similar corporate schemes there is no need to pay more.

Despite that, 16% of employers expect to pay in excess of £100 to provide staff with an eye test and glasses, 71% think it will cost more than £50 and 81%, more than £20. Only 13% correctly believe that corporate eyecare provision is actually possible for less than £20 per person, which is perhaps an indication of just how many employers are paying over the odds.

Communication

Communication is the vital element in making benefits pay for themselves. With employer-funded eyecare available for most employees, it is vital that staff are fully aware of their entitlement, not only so that they claim it but also so that it is achieved most cost-effectively.

Poor communication of entitlement, leading to the employee choosing their own provider of eyecare, can prove an extremely costly mistake. An employer presented with an expense form for a more costly option will either have to swallow this additional, and sometimes excessive, cost as a business or pass it back to the unsuspecting employee.

Materials explaining to employees what they are entitled to and how the process works are very important. All supporting documents should be written in plain English and communicated in a way that is clear, concise and easy to understand.

Employee benefits

Beyond financial savings, most employers recognise the further benefits of an eyecare vouchers system. Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents to the survey felt it was a simple system for employees, and more than half (53%) thought it offered consistency and transparency. Almost half (48%) would adopt a vouchers scheme to reduce administration times and one fifth (21%) would do so to benefit from the peripheral offers and discounts that come with such a scheme.

Computer work is not risky

While the DSE regulations aim to protect the health of people who work with VDUs it does not mean that such work is risky. If the user follows good practice, like setting up their workstation well and taking breaks in intensive work, then there is no reason why it is not totally safe.

The regulations were introduced because DSEs and VDUs have become one of the commonest kinds of work equipment. So there is potential to make work more comfortable and productive for very large numbers of people by taking a few simple precautions.

People who need glasses for reading will also need to use them for computer work. Such long-sightedness or hypermetropia occurs when the power of the eye is too weak or the eyeball is too short. It makes

the image focus behind the retina. The eyes may try too hard to focus, causing headaches or sometimes a squint. Convex lenses are used to correct this – they are thicker in the middle. Even people with nothing wrong with their eyesight can find that they get headaches when using a computer for too long. Shifting gaze from screen to keyboard means eyes have to change focus quickly, resulting in eyestrain. Wearing specially-tailored glasses with tints and lens treatments to reduce screen glare can help.

Contacts lens wearers may find they struggle more with their lenses when using a screen. The heat generated by computers and other equipment can make the air seem drier, and some may find this uncomfortable. Those that have this problem but do not want to change to wearing glasses may find that the simple act of blinking more often or using tear-substitute drops can help. Where the air is dry, employers can help by taking steps to increase the humidity.

People with bifocal spectacles may find them less than ideal for VDU work. It is important to be able to see the screen easily without having to raise or lower the head. Those that cannot work comfortably with bifocals, may need a different type of glasses lens such as varifocals. The bad news for staff is that employers are not legally obliged to pay for bifocal or varifocal glasses.

Wider benefits

Specsavers has now completed the installation of millions of pounds worth of life-saving digital retinal cameras (also known as fundus cameras) across its network of UK stores.

The cameras allow Specsavers Corporate Eyecare to provide a digital retinal screening service to all appropriate clients. Retinal screening with a fundus camera is an integral part of health and wellbeing, with the emphasis on preventative care.

Now being used routinely by Specsavers Corporate Eyecare in full eye examinations for the over 40s, including for VDU and safety eyewear, the fundus technology allows the optometrist to detect and monitor the following illnesses and health conditions:

- diabetes
- various heart conditions
- cancers of the eye, such as melanomas
- brain tumours
- high cholesterol
- detached retina
- high cholesterol
- hypertension (high blood pressure)
- glaucoma

With, for example, 2.6 million people in the UK diagnosed with diabetes and more than 500,000 people unknowingly having the condition, this screening is a vital part of health and wellbeing. Detecting such conditions with a fundus camera is inexpensive but could save businesses millions in absenteeism and long-term sick leave.

Making sense of it all

Finding the right supplier of corporate eyecare is important on a number of levels. It must be able to offer a consistent level of service and be considered trustworthy by both the company and the employee. Administration needs to be considered as systems that save time will save money. Cost control is paramount, there are a number of options that will satisfy legislation and they all come with a different price tag, by choosing the right supplier it is possible to save a third of what some will charge.

This guide aims to ensure company compliance with the regulations, and that all employees are kept fit and healthy. This clearly matters to the overwhelming majority of UK firms. One of the most encouraging findings of the Specsavers survey was the 73% of respondents who said that they were happy to provide eyecare because they were anxious to be a responsible employer, and not simply because regulations were in place.

Case study – Welsh Assembly

Specsavers Corporate Eyecare provides DSE eyecare for the Welsh Assembly Government's 6,500 employees. Finding high levels of service at a competitive price is important for any organisation but this is particularly vital in the public sector. Specsavers Corporate Eyecare's voucher scheme offered the Welsh Assembly Government the value for money they required. The professional service provided has helped to turn this obligatory care into a valued employee benefit.

Specsavers Corporate Eyecare has attended several successful Health Fair days, promoting the importance of eyecare to employees of the Welsh Assembly Government. With the aid of a vision screener, they carried out basic tests to establish whether employees needed an eye examination.

Having 41 Specsavers stores throughout Wales to choose from helped to secure the contract as it means employees of the Welsh Assembly Government do not have far to travel for eyecare.

Case study – NSL

Leading outsourcing company NSL has appointed Specsavers Corporate Eyecare to administer its eyecare policy to staff. NSL now provides eyecare vouchers for all staff to whom the DSE legislation applies. Prior to the implementation of the voucher scheme, employees paid for their eye tests and glasses

if required for VDU use – out of their own pocket, and this was then reimbursed via expenses. This meant that there was no consistency of service for their staff.

The voucher scheme from Specsavers Corporate Eyecare means that employees do not have any out-of-pocket expenses, all national offices have a consistency of service at any Specsavers store, and costs can now be better monitored and controlled.

Case study – APCOA

The UK's leading parking management service, APCOA, is utilising Specsavers Corporate Eyecare's services to meet its obligations under the health and safety Display Screen Equipment Regulations.

APCOA provides parking solutions for both private and public sector clients, offering parking management, enforcement and security. Of its 2,500 employees, around 100 are classed as 'users' of display screen equipment. This includes not only those using traditional PCs but also CCTV monitoring personnel and those using hand-held screens.