When dust gets in your eyes – a to-do list for workplace vision safety

We’ve heard of taking the red-eye home from a business trip. But for roughly 2,000 people every day, the red-eye can be a regular work floor occurrence.

That’s roughly the number of U.S. workers who sustain daily job-related eye injuries that require medical attention, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. The causes of these injuries can range from flying wood chips to infections, or be as typical as dust. If you’ve ever had so much as an eyelash in your eye, you can imagine how upending it can be.

Two key factors contribute to these injuries: Either the workers aren’t wearing any eye protection, or they aren’t wearing the proper protection for the job (regular eyeglasses may not be enough).

This bit of eye safety can make a huge difference. Safety experts and eye doctors estimate that correct eye protection can lessen or prevent 90 percent of eye injuries. Like those odds? Then read on for a to-do list on eye safety.

1. **CHECK YOUR BENEFITS:**
   See if your employer offers access to protective eyewear, because many do. Companies that offer EyeMed vision benefits, for example, provide their employees with allowances that can be used toward the purchase of protective eyewear for work.

2. **REDUCE HAZARDS:**
   Check the tools you’ll be working with and ensure you know how to use them properly. Survey your surroundings and make sure items around you (including above you) are stable and unlikely to fall or shatter. If you work at a computer, position it 20 to 26 inches away and take regular breaks.

3. **KNOW THE GUIDELINES:**
   Your workplace should have eye safety instructions clearly posted, so put on your reading glasses and learn them. For example, the American National Standards Institute has established safety eyewear guidelines that include a range of physical protection, from safety goggles to full-face respirators.

4. **WEAR THE RIGHT STUFF:**
   Learn the appropriate eye and face protection for your particular task and make sure it’s in working order before you put it on – every time. Among the options are safety glasses, safety goggles, safety helmets and face shields. More on these items next.
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KNOW WHAT TO WEAR FOR THE TASK:
Are dust, chips or flying particles part of your daily work environment? Then you need safety glasses. Safety goggles offer additional shielding that protects eyes in all directions. Safety helmets and face shields guard against chemicals, heat and pathogens, and should be worn with safety glasses or goggles (for when the shield is lifted). Lastly, if you work with lasers or use a welder, your gear should have filters to protect from radiation.5

BE FITTED:
Safety glasses and other items can’t do their job if they do not fit. You’re in good shape when the adjustable arms (or temples) fit comfortably over your ears and the frame is as close to your face as possible, supported by the bridge of your nose. If you wear prescription glasses, your goggles should fit over them.6, 7

KNOW YOUR MATERIAL:
Safety lenses are available in plastic, polycarbonate and Trivex, a branded material that is strong, lightweight and delivers comfort, protection and clear vision. All are lightweight and must meet minimum requirements for vision protection. However, polycarbonate lenses provide the greatest level of protection from impact.8 Heck, it’s used by astronauts.

BE LIKE A BOY SCOUT:
Be prepared. Locate the eye flushes or sterile eyewash solutions, and determine the fastest path to them. Also, establish injury protocol for those workers nearest to you. A clear safety word that indicates an eye injury (“redeye”) will alert co-workers to come to aid.

THE RUB:
Most eye injuries result from small particles or objects that hit or scratch the eye. If you get something in your eye, try not to rub it. Instead, find water or get to the eyewash station and rinse for 15 to 20 minutes. Also, seek medical attention from your safety supervisor.9 If you puncture your eye, do not wash it. Shield it and seek medical help – stat.10

UNDERSTAND THE AID:
Managers should post first aid instructions that are clear and easy to find. Be sure to know where they are and that they include details on how and where to get help. As an added precaution, you can copy that number and post it at your workstation.

6Ibid.
11Ibid.