

DISPLAY SCREEN EQUIPMENT (DSE) / VISUAL DISPLAY UNIT (VDU) EYE EXAMINATIONS

The following advice sheet can be issued to employers, together with the VDU/DSE report form

The Regulations

The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations came into force on January 1st 1993. Many employers find that the Regulations are beneficial in improving employee morale and reducing stress but the take up of the eye examination provision is considerably lower than originally anticipated. There are still misunderstandings concerning the regulations by employers, employees and optometrists.

Employer's Responsibility

The employer is responsible for the health and safety of all who work in his premises. The Display Screen Regulations 1992 impose on management specific responsibilities for the care of direct employees, who in the Regulations are termed "users". These duties are additional to the general duties of care required to satisfy other legislation.

All employed habitual users of Display Screen Equipment are entitled to eye examinations paid for by their employer. It is normally agreed that 'habitual' means regularly using a terminal for spells of over one hour - less if mistakes can have a critical effect e.g. situations where errors can have serious consequences. The acceptance by the user of a visual screening check, whatever the result, does not remove the entitlement to a full eye examination. Vision screening, if carried out annually, may have a useful role to play in identifying "users" who need a re-examination.

The employer is also required to pay for any spectacles specifically required for VDU use. The employer does not have to pay for spectacles which were not prescribed under the employer's arrangements nor for the provision or updating of "normal" spectacles, even if these are used for display screen work. The employer can, when making arrangements for employees, choose a suitable range of basic frames to satisfy the requirements of the Regulations and to provide some choice to the employee.

Optometrist's Responsibility

The purpose of the examination is to increase comfort and accuracy when using a display screen and covers all aspects of workstation use. The optometrist requires some detail of the workstation design, lighting, ventilation, work routine and training. All these can affect symptoms and in undertaking an eye examination the optometrist will keep in mind the other requirements of the DSE Regulations. The user should provide workstation measurements such as the distance at which the screen is viewed, the distance of the keyboard and that of any written or printed papers used at the workstation. These should be measured in each case. Documents supplied which specify pre-printed rather than individual measurements for that workstation are not adequate.

The examination will include the provisions of the "Sight Test" as defined by the Opticians Act 1989, but will be extended to take into account the needs of the individual user in relation to the DSE Regulations. To ensure that all the requirements of the DSE Regulations are satisfied, the optometrist should know, at the outset, that he/she is conducting an examination under the DSE Regulations. The employer should not try to make arrangements retrospectively. Adequate time should be allowed by the optometrist for the discussion of problems and methods of alleviating them. The extra time needed will probably be reflected in the fee charged for this work. An examination carried out without reference to DSE will probably not record sufficient detail for subsequent advice relating to DSE work. Additional charges should be expected for detailed reports. (A suitable form follows this section). Such reports cannot be given without the consent of the employee. The findings of the eye examination remain confidential even when paid for by the employer, unless the employee specifically gives permission for this information to be divulged.

It is preferable for the employee to choose the examining optometrist rather than have a practitioner pre-selected by an employer. This has the advantage of permitting continuity of eye care and maintaining the confidence of the user. Such arrangements fit well into the requirements of the Display Screen Regulations. Employers should be wary of selecting an optometrist purely on the basis of the lowest fee being charged, as an examination carried out without reference to DSE will probably not record sufficient detail for subsequent advice relating to DSE work.

It needs to be emphasised that failure to meet the recommended visual standards does not constitute an automatic debarment to continue with DSE or VDU work.

VDU Spectacles

In a minority of cases "specific" spectacles are required. The employer pays for such basic appliances, but should not be expected to pay for any fashion element. It is very rare for a first correction or replacement near vision spectacle to be required solely for display screen use. In some countries "specific need" is more broadly interpreted as a "a major use of the spectacles". The Health and Safety Executive, in consultation with the major optometry bodies, has taken the view that "specific" is based upon correcting the screen range with possible additional help for closer or further objects as appropriate.

In order to be appropriate for the work undertaken, it may be necessary to prescribe spectacles in multifocal form for some older users. These will normally incorporate an intermediate (screen distance) upper lens together with a reading section. Often these spectacles will be inappropriate for use other than with display screens. If the work includes visual tasks at distances away from the workstation, trifocals or varifocals may be necessary to achieve these tasks. A tinted lens would not normally be prescribed in spectacles specifically for VDU use, unless this tint is clinically necessary and also incorporated in the person's normal spectacles. However many employers' schemes offer to pay sufficient to cover the cost of single vision lenses only, e.g. to pay for a proportion of the total cost involved. Such schemes are likely to be in breach of the Regulations and the employer cannot be absolved from the obligation to provide for more costly lenses, should the optometrist consider them a necessity. Even if the paper work is in copy-holders at screen distance, the lighting requirements for screen and paper work differ widely and may not be resolved satisfactorily with single vision lenses.

Most VDU users do not need specific spectacle correction for workstation use. The eye examination offers the opportunity to advise how the user can increase comfort. The person's own spectacles will normally cope satisfactorily with the work until the user is well into middle age. Where a younger person requires a specific correction it is not unreasonable for the employer to expect the prescribing optometrist to state the reasons.