Millions of UK workers spend most of the working day on their feet. Hazard editor Rory O’Neill warns there are serious health reasons why they shouldn’t stand for it.

In the 1970s and 1980s, at the height of the Victorian era, doctors in Paris, London and New York began to report large numbers of “shop girls” suffering foot ailments caused by prolonged standing in unsuitable shoes.

Dr Arthur Edis, in a letter to the Times on 7 November 1878, called for an end to “slavery in the West End.” Two years later, the Lancet launched an editorial campaign against “this cruelty to women.”

Today, in Britain’s “meat-and-greet”, have-a-quick-service sector, major UK retailers are insisting staff stand and deliver. And workers from machine operators to casino dealers, postal sorters to laundries workers, can spend almost all their working day on their feet.

And it is not just their feet that suffer. Prolonged standing at work has been linked to leg and back pain, varicose veins, circulatory problems, including a possible increased stroke risk, and difficulties in pregnancy.

Why stand for it?

Doug Russell, national safety officer with UK retail union Usdaw, says his union has “a history of having to fight to maintain the idea that seating should be allowed at checkout in retail.”

The better employers, including Tesco and Sainsbury’s, accept “the best practice is to provide a seat and to give the operator the choice to vary between sitting and standing over the course of their shift.”

But others, including major high street firms, do not. The union is currently in dispute with Boots retail, whose new checkouts are designed for standing use only.

There is nothing inevitable about standing to work. European studies suggest between one-third and half of all workers spend more than 4 hours a day on their feet, either standing or walking. This means more than seven million and possibly as many as 11 million UK workers could spend at least half their working day on their feet.

In Sweden, however, a study found only 19 per cent of men and 15 per cent of women aged 20-64 worked standing more than one-tenth of their day.

Attention! Workers at risk include:

- Retail/museum/library staff
- Machine operators
- Assembly line workers
- Checkpoint operators
- Catering/waiting staff
- Casino dealers
- Postal workers/sorters
- Laundry staff
- Health care workers
- Nursery/teaching staff
- Construction workers
- Hairdressers/barbers
- Traffic wardens
- Bar/hospitality staff

How I got my varicose veins

Jim Marshall started work as an apprentice in heavy engineering in Glasgow in 1963, at the age of 16.

As a turner, his job involved “standing for at least eight hours, sometimes 12, a day operating a turning lathe. Some had wooden duck boards, but often I had to stand on concrete.”

He noticed his first varicose vein after three years. By the time he was in his 30s, both legs were covered in sometimes irritable veins. “I lost worked in engineering in October 1983 when I first became unemployed and then went to college and university.”

He told his GP his work history and was told he “probably contracted varicose veins through standing for long periods on concrete and wood. I had no idea that this could have caused the problem until then.”

No job, no pension, no justice

David Cramer, 55, was employed for 13 years as a school site manager in Weymouth, and was a highly qualified UNISON branch safety officer and safety rep.

His employer finished him on medical grounds in February 2005 when bad knees, the result of a workplace accident, made it difficult for him to cope with prolonged standing. “This accident has cost my job, my tied accommodation, my credit status and my leisure interest,” he said.

David is “very angry” with the occupational doctor who said he “would be capable of doing alternative employment provided that I had the flexibility to stand, sit and move about in order to exercise my legs,” meaning he can’t claim his pension.

No soft shoe struggle

When Amec’s GPM safety rep Richard Thompson undertook a union safety survey in his print shop, he found half his workmates were suffering feet and knee problems, which he linked to prolonged standing.

He presented his findings to management at Colindale in Bristol, who responded immediately and positively. In a trial agreement with the union, workers were issued with cushioned insoles for their shoes.

“The trial with the insoles supplied has been encouraging and they should now be available to all,” said Richard.