

Standing problem

Millions of UK workers spend most of the working day on their feet.

Hazards editor Rory O'Neill warns there are serious health reasons why they shouldn't stand for it.

In the 1870s and 1880s, 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 meet-and-greet, have-a-nice-day service sector, major UK retailers are insisting staff stand and deliver. And workers from machine operators to casino dealers, postal sorters to laundry 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, circula-

SAFETY REPS' CHECKLIST

Don't accept standing is inevitable – make sure management investigates alternative job and workstation designs

Ensure all jobs have been subject to risk assessments – walking and standing are work activities that should be considered

Ensure workers have the option to use seats wherever possible

Where standing is required, ensure workstations have been adapted and work methods reviewed to reduce the risks

Jobs requiring more standing also require more rest breaks

Investigate whether job rotation or job enlargement could make jobs better and healthier

Mats, insoles and other measures can be introduced to make standing work more comfortable, but should only be introduced in consultation with the union and workers

tory 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 checkouts 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
- Checkout operators
- Catering/waiting staff
- Casino dealers
- Postal workers/sorters
- Industrial laundry staff
- Health care workers
- Nursery/teaching staff
- Construction workers
- Hairdressers/barbers
- Traffic wardens
- Bar/hospitality staff

Health effects

Professor Karen Messing of the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM), the author of several papers on the risks of prolonged standing, told *Hazards*: "Worsening of existing coronary heart disease as well as varicose veins and chronic venous insufficiency have been associated with prolonged standing. Pain in the lower limbs and feet are also associated."

A 2002 review of 17 studies of the health risks associated with prolonged standing concluded these included poor blood flow, pain in the feet and lower back, preterm birth and spontaneous abortions. Recent studies have made clear links with heart and circulatory disease. Some workers, for example those with varicose veins caused by pregnancy, with arthritis or who have suffered a back or lower limb injury, may be particularly badly affected by excessive standing.

Standing symptoms

- painful/swollen feet and legs
- bunions/corns
- varicose veins
- Achilles tendonitis
- heel problems, plantar fasciitis
- arthritis in knees and hips
- low back pain
- locking of joints
- pregnancy problems
- heart/circulatory problems

Several factors can lead to problems. Joint compression, caused by joints bearing the whole weight of the body and any load while standing, can lead to wear and tear and arthritis. Muscle fatigue can occur, as both standing and walking require constant muscle work. Prolonged standing can also reduce circulation of blood (venous insufficiency) and other body fluids causing swelling

and varicose veins.

It is possible to minimise the risks where standing cannot be avoided, through improved workstation design, job design and flooring, anti-fatigue mats and personal protective equipment (see the *Hazards* guide at www.hazards.org/standing).

The safe solution

The Canadian autoworkers' union CAW advises its members that "working on your feet for more than 30 per cent of the work shift can produce health effects, so we must raise these issues in our health and safety committee meetings and at the bargaining table." CAW says key objectives of union negotiations should be to:

- Reduce the time spent standing or walking
- Obtain suitable, adjustable chairs
- Negotiate more rest breaks
- Alternate standing and walking with sitting
- Make work surfaces height-adjustable.

Udaw national safety officer Doug Russell cites Makro, the cash and carry warehouse chain, as an example of how to go about it the wrong way. Its new checkouts were basically avenues through which trade customers wheeled flat-bed trolleys laden with bulk buys and where staff scanned large items with hand-held scanners.

"In practice not all shoppers at Makro are wholesale customers," said Russell. "There are a large number who use the conventional supermarket trolleys and the operator had to lift boxes out of one trolley into another to scan them."

The system was unworkable and unhealthy, leading to several prosecution threats. "They did eventually come and talk to us. Five years later the net result is that in most of their stores 50 per cent of checkouts are now the conventional seated design – for supermarket trolley shoppers – and 50 per cent are the new design."

The law at work

Employers have a duty under section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to do all that is reasonably practicable to protect their workers' health and safety.

Regulation 11(3) of the Workplace (Health Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 says suitable seating must be provided where a substantial part of the work can or must be done whilst seated.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers to carry out risk assessments and eliminate risks where possible (regulation 3), with addition duties to protect pregnant workers.

Both the Disability Discrimination Act and the Sex Discrimination Act can apply in occupational health and safety settings, where employers fail to take adequate measures to accommodate workers who have disabilities or are pregnant.

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 last 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 Craner, 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 Amicus-GPM safety rep Rich 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 Colodense in Bristol, who responded immediately and positively. In a trial agreed with the union, workers were issued with cushioned insoles for their shoes. "The trial with the insoles they supplied has been encouraging and they should now be available to all," said Rich.



Graphics: Ned Jolliffe