

**Specsavers Corporate Eyecare  
Guide to DSE (Display Screen Equipment) regulations**

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### **Legislation**

Every new technology brings with it health scare stories. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, worrymongers claimed that pioneering rail passengers would in all probability explode when the steam locomotive reached a certain speed. In our own day, there are still fears that waves from mobile telephone masts may be injurious to our well-being. And so it was in the 1980s, when Visual Display Units (VDUs) became widely used in the workplace. There were real concerns that radiation from computer screens and electronic 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.

The Health & Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992, amended in 2002, is still in place to protect workers who regularly use computer screens. Some firms aren't sure which of their employees are covered by the legislation. It is probably safer – and simpler – to assume that employees who use VDUs are covered by the regulations. After all, it may be possible for a company to comply with the law just by paying for a regular eye examination, which is not a costly exercise. Opticians who deal with corporate customers report that some employers are prepared to go to extraordinary lengths in order to avoid a cost that might amount to about £17 every two years.

Staff who work from home are 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.

The regulations are more confused for temporary staff. If they are deemed to be employed by an agency, the agency is liable for safety and welfare provision. If they are self-employed, they are responsible for their own eyecare needs.

### **What do the regulations entail?**

The full list of regulations is lengthy, but they boil down to this: employers are required to provide eye tests, carried out by a qualified optician, when employees who work with VDUs ask for them. The regulations give employers the right to nominate a specific optician to carry out the tests, 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 or spectacles 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.

### **How to administer the regulations in practice**

Many firms find it time-efficient and cost-effective to set up corporate eyecare arrangements with a service provider. A voucher scheme makes it easy to provide staff with eye tests and eyewear. Such schemes can be arranged through a diverse network of affiliated opticians, through a single local optician, or with a national chain.

It is best to investigate all the available options as costs will vary enormously, depending on the suppliers' buying power, their enthusiasm for corporate business, and the presence of any overheads involved in third-party management of a network.

Whilst some eyecare service-providers will charge a premium for corporate work, some opticians will offer extremely competitive rates in exchange for the opportunity to offer their services exclusively to a workforce.

Centralised services, such as vouchers that can be bought from the corporate eyecare department of some opticians chains, or through third-party network coordinators will eliminate burdensome administration costs as multiple payments are replaced by a single transaction.

It is equally important that the chosen provider has opticians in all the locations that employees are likely to be. Setting up an agreement only to find that there is insufficient coverage, forcing employees to opt out of the service is counter-productive and negates any possible gains.

Dealing with an optician, or chain of opticians direct will also ensure that any performance or service delivery issues are addressed directly by the company with whom you have the service arrangements. Opticians operate in a unique clinical environment in which accountability and integrity are essential virtues.

### **Other steps**

In reality, working with a VDU is just one of many tasks undertaken at work that requires concentrated effort, and consequently there are simple steps that can be taken to mitigate the impact of unnecessary strain.

For instance:

- Train staff in the correct use of equipment and ensure that there is sufficient space for whatever documents or other equipment that is required to complete tasks.
- Establish sensible positioning and adjusting of the workstation to achieve good posture. For most users the correct monitor position will be 33cm – 60cm from their eyes and the ideal centre of the screen is 10cm – 15cm below the natural eye level. A font size of 12pts or above should be selected, depending on screen size.
- A point that is often overlooked is the importance of ensuring that the computer screen is kept clean and free of smears.
- Create an eye-friendly environment by positioning copy documents at roughly the same distance from the eyes as the screen to avoid having to re-focus.
- Use a document holder if necessary to avoid awkward neck movements.
- Arrange appropriate work place lighting. Surprisingly, dimming the lights can actually help (the ratio of ambient light to monitor light should be three to one). Replace any flashing or strobing lights in a timely fashion.

- Arrange the workspace to minimise any glare or reflections taking into account position with respect to uncovered windows. Ensure that staff take regular breaks away from the screen and rest their eyes every 20 minutes. On screen reminders are a good idea.
- Maintain a reasonable level of humidity, particularly for contact lens wearers.
- Keep blinking. This is important as concentration on the screen for long periods will slow the blink rate and dry the eyes.

All of these measures help firms comply with the regulations. They also enable staff to take care of their precious sight, and help companies take care of their most precious assets – their employees.

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