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GUIDANCE ON FOOT HEALTH AND SELECTION OF APPROPRIATE WORKPLACE FOOTWEAR

Version III

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many foot problems can be attributed to the wearing of unsuitable footwear or due to prolonged standing. There are two major categories of work-related foot injuries. The first category includes foot injuries from punctures, crushing, sprains, and lacerations. They account for 10 percent of all reported disabling injuries. The second group of injuries includes those resulting from slips, trips and falls. They account for 15 percent of all reported disabling injuries. Slips and falls do not always result in a foot injury but lack of attention to foot safety plays an important role in their occurrence.

Our feet play a vital part in our daily working lives. Prolonged standing, badly fitting footwear, high heels, slippery surfaces and falling objects are just some of the dangers to which we expose our feet in the workplace. Like every other danger, the risk can be avoided or removed if the employer and the employee take simple steps. The biggest risk probably comes from slips and trips. This can frequently result from wearing inappropriate footwear. The College ensures that floors are kept clean, dry and are kept free from any hazards to persons using the buildings that may lead to an accident from a slip, trip or fall.

2. Health and Safety Legislation

Irish Health and Safety Legislation includes PPE and footwear in the workplace. The basic legislative requirement is that all reasonable efforts must be made to eliminate or reduce the likelihood of injury occurring in the first place. Chapter 3 of Part 2 of the *Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2007*, stipulates that it is the duty of every employer to provide personal protective equipment for use by his employees, where the risks cannot otherwise be avoided or sufficiently limited by technical means of collective protection or by measures, methods or procedures of work organisation. Risk assessments are used to decide whether a member of College Staff needs special footwear for work.

3. ACCIDENTS AT WORK AND RESULTING FOOT PROBLEMS

In the workplace, unprotected feet are at risk from accident and injury such as puncture wounds crushing and laceration, sprained ankles, chemical burns, fractures and even amputations. Feet are particularly prone to the following problems:

- Aches or pains in the heel, arch, ball of the foot or legs
- Itching and in the legs caused by varicose veins.
- Numbness, tingling in the foot, changes to the colour of the skin, caused by poor circulation.
- Swelling in the feet, ankle or leg
- Sprained ankles, fracture or broken bones resulting from slips, trips and falls. Causes include slippery floors, long stride length with the wrong heel, cluttered walkways, incorrect footwear and poor lighting.

Constant walking on hard surfaces while wearing shoes that are a poor fit or have too high a heel can lead to:

- Knee, hip, back and neck pain
- Corns and hard skin
- Sweaty feet
- Athlete's foot.

4. CHOOSING FOOTWEAR

Staff should wear footwear that is appropriate to their job, working environment, and feet. With that said, the College ensures that the risks to feet are assessed, and if safety footwear is required following a risk assessment the College will supply it at no cost to the staff member. In many workplaces, safety shoes are necessary to protect against environmental risks, but they also need to be comfortable and correctly fitted.

There is a misconception that safety shoes, especially proactive toecaps, will be uncomfortable, but if the shoes are padded and fitted correctly, you should not be able to feel the toecaps at all. Wherever safety footwear is provided the College will ensure that it fits properly, is comfortable to wear and should allow the toes adequate room (around 1cm gap between the longest toe and the end of the shoe). A selection of safety footwear is available to staff and staff can choose the option that suits their individual requirements; this will help ensure that staff will wear them but once issued with safety shoes, staff will be required to wear them at all times while at work.

Comfortable, properly fitted footwear is essential to maintaining good foot health. Many minor foot ailments can be relieved with properly fitted and carefully selected shoes.

5. TIPS ON GETTING THE RIGHT FIT

The following advice on choosing footwear will assist persons in making a decision on the most suitable work footwear to suit their needs:

- Always have both feet measured because they may not be the same size.
- When choosing shoes, the length, width and depth of the shoes are important.
- Always try on both shoes.
- Ensure there is enough room at the front of the shoes to allow for the natural movement of your toes when walking – your toes should be able to wiggle.
- Make sure there is around 1cm space between your longest toe and the end of the shoe.
- When choosing new shoes, take time to test them out, and walk around to ensure maximum comfort.
- Don't break in new shoes. Shoes that fit well should feel comfortable.

As you get older, your feet tend to get larger, so get them measured periodically.

6. CHOOSING THE BEST SHOES IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT YOU SHOULD LOOK FOR

- Heel – this should have a broad base, and should be no greater than 4cm (1 1/2”) in height
- Heel Counter – this reinforces the heel cup and stabilises the foot upon ground contact
- Sole – should provide cushioning and protection for comfortable walking, and enough grip to prevent slipping
- Upper – ideally made from natural materials such as leather or breathable fabrics to keep feet comfortable
- Linings – breathable materials such as leather or fabric keep the foot fresh; they need to be smooth and seam-free
- Fastenings – laces or straps with buckles or touch fastenings help to hold the foot securely within the shoe

- Toe Box – sufficient depth to prevent rubbing and allow toes to wiggle
- Insole – preferably removable to allow easy insertion of padding or orthoses

7. GENERAL TIPS ON CHOOSING SUITABLE FOOTWEAR

Badly fitting shoes can be very damaging to feet. In fact, many adult foot problems occur, or can be made worse, because they wear poorly fitting shoes. To help prevent damage to your feet, and for comfort and foot health, it's essential that your shoes fit your feet correctly. Comfortable shoes will allow your feet to work normally, and will not restrict their movement in any way. While the size of the shoe you buy is important, it's also a good idea to check the following shoe fitting points to make sure that the shoe will be comfortable when you go walking:

- Make sure there's 1/2 inch (1cm) of space between your longest toe and the end of the shoe – this can easily be checked by pressing the upper to locate the position of your toes.
- Check there's enough room for your toes to wiggle in the shoe.
- There should be enough width in the shoe to accommodate your whole foot
- There should be no pressure on the joints on the sides of your foot.
- For comfort, shoes shouldn't slip at the back. If the shoe slips when you walk, push your heel to the back of the shoe, and then try altering the laces or straps to improve the fit against your foot.

8. PROLONGED STANDING

While inadequate footwear can cause problems for feet, so can prolonged standing. This can damage joints, cause swelling of the legs, and result in a range of problems for the feet, including bunions and corns, steel spurs and even flat feet. Workers who stand for long periods while at work are at greatly increased risk of pain and discomfort around their feet, legs, hips and lower back. Varicose veins are also associated with prolonged standing.

In fact both constant standing and prolonged sitting can result in health problems. The healthy option is to alternate between sitting, standing or moving around whenever appropriate.

9. SHOE STYLES, ORTHOSES AND TIPS FOR GOOD FOOT HEALTH

High Heels are a popular form of footwear in the workplace but they can cause problems ranging from blisters, corns and calluses to serious foot, knee and back pain. The following tips will help you to enjoy wearing high heels without damaging your feet and having an accident due to slipping or tripping:

- Medium height high heels are the most practical option for working feet. It is good for the feet to vary the type and height of the footwear worn.
- It is advisable to wear higher heels for only short periods of time, and occasionally. Limit wearing them to around three to eight hours.
- According to leading Chiropodists and podiatrists, 90% of patients wear shoes that are too small, so make sure you pay attention to proper shoe-fitting before you purchase.
- Give your feet some extra-special attention after wearing high heels – enjoy a relaxing foot bath and a moisturising massage when you get home.

Orthoses – Many people now wear corrective insoles or orthoses within their shoes. These may be simple pads or insoles that protect a tender joint or a sophisticated orthosis that corrects the way the foot functions. In order for this treatment to succeed, the correct types of shoes must be worn. It is important to discuss shoes if you are thinking about using orthoses, as not every type of shoe is suitable.

Chiropodists recommend that shoes should have:

- Depth at the toe and the heel
- Adjustable fastening
- No more than 4cm (1 1/2”) heel height
- Removable insole to allow easy accommodation of the orthoses
- Slip-on shoes or fashion shoes are generally less suitable to use with orthoses. As these shoes tend to have a shallow fitting, there may be problems fitting the device and the foot into the shoe at the same time.
- For advice on orthoses please contact your local Chiropodist

Work – In a normal working day, you can easily walk several miles, and just standing still can also put strain on your feet. If you are on your feet a lot, you should wear well-fitting, comfortable shoes with cushioning and flexible soles.

If you work in wet conditions, you must wear waterproof footwear and socks which are thick enough to keep your feet warm, but not too tight that they affect your circulation.

10. Tips for Good Foot Health

Proper foot care is essential to healthy, painless feet, and should be as much a part of your daily routine as brushing your teeth.

Tips for good foot health include:

- Wear shoes that are appropriate for your job and suitable for your work conditions
- Wear safety footwear if the job requires or recommends it
- Vary heel height from day to day
- Wear shoes with a strap or lace over the instep rather than slip-ons. This will stop your foot sliding forwards, a bit like a seatbelt does in a car.
- Where slips can occur wear slip resistant footwear
- Adopt a regular foot care regime to keep your feet in tip-top condition, as follows:
- Wash your feet every day in warm, soapy water and dry thoroughly
- If your skin is dry, apply moisturising cream
- Trim your toenails regularly; try to cut straight across and not too short
- Keep your feet warm, and exercise to improve circulation
- Visit a Chiropodist/Podiatrist for advice – you can take your shoes with you for specific advice on footwear.

11. How to Prevent Blisters

- Keep your feet dry
- Always wear socks as a cushion between your feet and shoes
- Wear properly fitting shoes

- If a blister does occur, do not pop it. Cut a hole in a piece of foam or felt, forming a ‘doughnut’ over the blister; tape the foam or felt in place or cover with a soft gel-type dressing
- Treat an open blister with mild soap and water; cover it with an anti-septic ointment and protective soft gel dressing to prevent infection and speed up the healing process.

12. Exercises to Keep Your Feet in Peak Condition

- Circle your feet ten times in each direction, keeping your legs as still as possible
- Consciously straighten your toes then wiggle them around
- Raise, point and curl your toes for five seconds each, repeated ten times – this is particularly good for toe cramps or hammer toes
- You can prevent foot problems before they occur by visiting a Chiropodist/Podiatrist near you for advice on how to keep your feet healthy.

13. Further information

<http://www.podiatryireland.com>

Working Feet – ‘A Practical Guide to Looking After Your Feet at Work’ available at www.feetforlife.org