

Office Ergonomics

Neck and shoulder pain, tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome—how can working at a desk job make you feel like you handle a jackhammer for a living? The answer is *ergonomics*, the science of coordinating physical working conditions to workers. The word comes from the Greek word *ergon*, meaning work; and *nomos*, meaning laws.

These *laws of work* aim to make people fit into workplaces to improve health and productivity by making workspaces more comfortable. Many companies have ergonomic programs covering noise, air temperature and humidity, and even how employees sit in front of their computers. Proper ergonomics can ease job stress and prevent chronic injuries and disabilities, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, excessive fatigue, eyestrain and irritation, blurred vision, headaches, stress, neck and back pain.

If you're concerned about stress and strains on your body, pay attention to your posture. A good ergonomic setup will help you maintain proper posture while you work, while a bad setup will have you twisting and turning all over the place. Make adjustments if you're uncomfortable. Don't let your office space dictate how you work. A well-designed workplace will boost your energy level, job satisfaction, and productivity.

Ergonomic Advice

Your body works best when you're in a relaxed, natural position.

Try to limit activities that put you in awkward positions or make your muscles tense. Other things you can do include

- Varying your tasks so you can alternate between standing and sitting
- Stretching and relaxing muscles and joints that have remained in the same position for long periods of time
- Remembering the 20/20 rule for tired eyes; look about 20 feet away for 20 seconds every 20 minutes

Use the telephone properly.

If you have to talk on the phone often, use the speaker function or a headset. Resting the phone between your ear and shoulder can cause neck and shoulder problems.

Take brief breaks from repetitive tasks.

Even in the most thoroughly ergonomic workstations, people who sit for long periods of time should change their positions at least once every hour. Try shifting your weight from side to side, standing up and walking around for a minute, or doing some stretching exercises.

Specific Recommendations

Posture

A common posture problem for people who work with computers is holding their heads in front of their shoulders and arching their necks, like turtles peering out of their shells. Slouched backs and rounded shoulders often accompany this poor posture. Working in this position can lead to frequent headaches, backaches, and sore necks. Fatigue that can't be relieved by rest breaks is another symptom.

If you experience these types of problems, you should ask a colleague to take a look at your workstation posture and describe it to you. See if you fit into any of the poor posture categories. If so, evaluate your workstation for any changes you can make.

Chairs

- Chair height should be at a level so your feet rest flat on the floor and your thighs are almost parallel to the floor. If your feet can't be flat on the floor, use a footrest.
- The front edge of the seat cushion should curve down slightly, allowing a two to three inch space from the backs of your knees. Ideally, the seat cushion should be able to slide forward, allowing you to recline slightly.
- The backrest should follow the natural curves of your spine to offer lumbar support. It should also recline. Leaning too far forward can put too much pressure on the back.
- Armrests should be padded and adjust vertically and horizontally. Armrests should be high enough to support your forearms comfortably, but not cause your shoulders to hunch up.
- The chair should have five legs for stability and be able to swivel and roll.
- A chair with a seat that can slide forward as you lean back, or with a reclined backrest with lumbar support, is the best model to prevent back pain.

Keyboards

Carpal tunnel syndrome is a common ailment suffered by office workers. It's caused by repetitive hand or wrist activity. Carpal tunnel syndrome is caused by pressure on one of the nerves that leads to the hand. One symptom is a tingling or pins and needles feeling in the fingers, especially at night or during activities that involve bending the fingers. Other symptoms include a burning sensation or hand weakness. Contact your health care provider if you have any of these symptoms.

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To avoid carpal tunnel syndrome, take the following precautions:

- Place your keyboard directly in front of your chair so your arms hang naturally and your wrists remain in a neutral position.
- Your adjustable keyboard support should have a space for your mouse that prevents overreaching.
- The keyboard support design should allow for your wrists, thumbs, and fingers to remain in a relaxed, neutral position.
- There should be plenty of room for your knees when you use the keyboard support.

Computer Screens

- Place the screen directly in front of your chair and keyboard.
- The top of the screen should be at eye level or one to two inches below eye level.
- Generally, the screen should be 18 to 30 inches from your eyes. However, you may find it more comfortable to place your monitor as far away as possible, as long as you can still see the screen clearly.
- Your work area should have indirect, overhead lighting.
- The screen should be placed to minimize glare or reflections.
- The screen should be clean.

If you sit for long periods of time, get up and walk around for a minute, or do some stretching exercises. These stretches are quick and easy to do at work, and you should do them several times a day.

Wrist Stretch

1. Press the backs of your hands together gently.
2. Keep your elbows pointing outward.
3. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat.

Neck Stretch

1. Tilt your head to one side.
2. Grasp your head with your arm from the same side and gently pull.
3. Hold for 10 to 20 seconds, and repeat three to five times.

Shoulder Stretch

1. Relax your arms by your sides.
2. Roll your shoulders up, back, down, and forward.
3. Emphasize the stretch on the back and down portions.
4. Reverse direction.

Back Stretch

1. Stand up and place one hand on each hip.
2. Bend backward gently until your lower back begins to arch.
3. Hold for several seconds.

Sitting Hamstring Stretch

1. Sit on the floor or on a chair with one leg propped up.
2. Keeping your back straight, lean forward toward the extended leg until you feel a stretch.
3. For a more intense stretch, pull your foot back toward your forehead as you lean forward.
4. Hold for 10 to 20 seconds, and repeat three to five times.



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