

Posture and Ergonomic Briefing

Tips for improving posture and ergonomics

Over time, poor posture may be caused by habits from everyday activities such as sitting in office chairs, looking at the computer, driving, standing for long periods of time, or even sleeping. Poor posture can easily become second nature, causing or aggravating episodes of back pain and damaging spinal structures. Fortunately, the main factors affecting posture and ergonomics are within one's ability to control and are not difficult to change. The following guidelines suggest several ways to improve posture and ergonomics, especially for people who work sitting in an office chair for most of the day.

- **Knowing the warning signs of back pain caused by poor ergonomics and posture.** Back pain may be the result of poor ergonomics and posture if the back pain is worse at certain times of day or week (such as after a long day of sitting in an office chair in front of a computer, but not during the weekends.); pain that starts in the neck and moves downwards into the upper back, lower back and extremities; pain that goes away after switching positions while sitting or standing; sudden back pain that is experienced with a new job, a new office chair, or a new car; and/or back pain that comes and goes for months.
- **Get up and move.** As muscles tire, slouching, slumping, and other poor postures become more likely; this in turn puts extra pressure on the neck and back. In order to maintain a relaxed yet supported posture, change positions frequently. One way is to take a break from sitting in an office chair every half hour for two minutes in order to stretch, stand, or walk. Stretching really helps ease muscle tension.
- **Keep the body in alignment while sitting in an office chair and while standing.** Distribute body weight evenly to the front, back, and sides of the feet while standing. While sitting in an office chair, take advantage of the chair's features. Sit up straight and align the ears, shoulders, and hips in one vertical line. Any single position, even a good one, will be tiring. Leaning forward with a straight back can alternate with sitting back, using the back support of the office chair to ease the work of back muscles. Also be aware of and avoid unbalanced postures such as crossing legs unevenly while sitting, leaning to one side, hunching the shoulders forward or tilting the head.
- **Use posture-friendly props and ergonomic office chairs when sitting.** Supportive ergonomic "props" can help to take the strain and load off of the spine. Ergonomic office chairs or chairs with an adjustable back support can be used at work. Footrests, portable lumbar back supports, or even a towel or small pillow can be used while sitting in an office chair and while driving. Using purses, bags, and backpacks that are designed to minimize back strain can also influence good posture. Proper corrective eye-wear, positioning computer screens to your natural, resting eye position can also help to avoid leaning or straining the neck with the head tilted forward.
- **Use exercise to help prevent injury and promote good posture.** Regular exercise such as walking, swimming, or bicycling will help the body stay aerobically conditioned, while specific strengthening exercises will help the muscles surrounding the back to stay strong. These benefits of exercise promote good posture, which will, in turn, further help to condition muscles and prevent injury. There are also specific exercises that will help maintain good posture. In particular, a balance of trunk strength with back muscles about 30% stronger than abdominal muscles is essential to help support the upper body and maintain good posture.
- **Wear supportive footwear when standing.** Avoid regularly wearing high-heeled shoes, which can affect the body's center of gravity and change the alignment of the entire body, negatively affecting back support and posture. When standing for long periods of time, placing a rubber mat on the floor can improve comfort.

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- **Remember good posture and ergonomics when in motion.** Walking, lifting heavy materials, holding a telephone, and typing are all moving activities that require attention to ergonomics and posture. It is important to maintain good posture even while moving to avoid injury. Back injuries are especially common while twisting and/or lifting and often occur because of awkward movement and control of the upper body weight alone.
- **Create ergonomic physical environments and workspaces, such as for sitting in an office chair at a computer.** It does require a small investment of time to personalize the workspace, home, and car, but the payoff will be well worth it. Undue strain will be placed\ on the structures of the spine unless the office chair, desk, keyboard, and computer screen, etc. are correctly positioned.
- **Avoid overprotecting posture.** Remember that it is important to maintain an overall relaxed posture to avoid restricting movements by clenching muscles and adopting an unnatural, stiff posture. For individuals who already have some back pain, it is a natural tendency to try to limit movements to avoid the potential pain associated with movement. However, unless there is a fracture or other serious problem, the structures in the spine are designed for movement and any limitation in motion over a long period of time create more pain and a downward cycle of less motion and more pain, etc.

A review of the latest literature from Central Connecticut Chiropractic.