How to Create an Ergonomic Workstation

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Sitting at a desk and staring at a computer screen for eight hours a day isn't natural. However, for many of us, our livelihood is tied to prolonged desk work. To stay healthy and productive, we need to customize our workspaces to fit us.

Most ergonomic advice focuses on maintaining a neutral, relaxed position as you work. A neutral position minimizes stress and fatigue placed on your muscles and joints. This means your back is supported, shoulders are relaxed and arms are at your side.

Your Chair

Finding the right chair and adjusting it properly is one of the most important things you can do to create a comfortable workspace.

Most people think they should buy an expensive "ergonomic" chair with all the bells and whistles, but it's more about adjusting the chair to your body.

Most problems can be solved with just a few of the following adjustments.

- **Back support**: Sit all the way back in your chair. Adjust the chair so that the curve of the chair supports the curve of your lower back.

- **Seat pan**: There should be two-to-three fingers worth of space between your calves and the seat pan. The seat pan should not press into the back of your calves.

- **Height**: Adjust the seat height so that your feet are on the floor and your knees are slightly below your hips. Your feet shouldn't dangle. If needed, support your feet with a foot rest.

- **Movement within chair:** Avoid bending and twisting your torso frequently. Instead, use your chair's swivel mechanism.

Your Keyboard

Many people work with their keyboards up on their desktops. This may cause discomfort by putting your upper body in an uncomfortable position.

- **Keyboard tray:** Michelle highly recommends installing an adjustable keyboard tray. It keeps your arms and hands low and relaxed, and discourages you from leaning forward in your chair.

- **Height:** Whether you use a keyboard tray or not, your keyboard should sit about one-to-two inches above your lap to ensure that your shoulders and arms are relaxed. To achieve this, you can raise the height of your chair and use a footrest.

- **Tilt:** Keep your keyboard straight or slightly tilted downward, not upward. Don't use the risers on the bottom of the keyboard, as they tilt your keyboard upward and can strain your wrists.

- **Reducing the workload**: Try a dictation tool for hands-free writing. You can also trying using a split keyboard, which puts your wrists into a more neutral position.

Your Monitor

Most people think their eyes should land in the middle of the computer screen. However, the proper place for your eyes is the top quarter of the screen. This puts your neck in a comfortable position.

- **Distance:** Your monitor should be an arm's length away. If you're too far away, you may compensate by leaning forward. Also, reading from a screen that's too far away or too close

can fatigue the eyes faster than normal.

- **Height**: Your head should be titled slightly downward. This puts your head and neck in a comfortable working position. If you need more height, try a monitor riser or a stack of books.

Your Mouse

To reduce repetitive stress to your wrist and hand, take frequent breaks. You can also reduce stress by occasionally performing mouse work with your opposite hand.

- **Grip strength**: Don't grip the mouse tightly. Instead, hold the mouse loosely, as if you were gripping a potato chip.

- **Movement**: Move the mouse from your shoulder/elbow, not by moving your hand side-to-side.

- **Vertical mouse**: A vertical mouse puts your hand in a more neutral position.

- **Relieving tension**: Repetitive strain from mouse work can aggravate tendons in the arm. To relieve tension, shake out your hands and arms for about 30-60 seconds, whenever you feel the need to stimulate blood flow.

Don't Forget to Move!

Adjusting your equipment is important, but so is movement. Pay attention to your body. If your shoulders are tense, lower them. If your hips are tight, stretch them. If your back aches, go for a walk.

Try the "20-8-2 rule." Sit for 20 minutes, stand for eight minutes, and walk for two minutes. Take micro-breaks every 30 minutes. This could be a two-minute stroll around the office.

Standing workstations are all the rage. If you use one, make sure it's adjusted to fit you and don't stand too long. Standing for long periods can fatigue the back and legs, so change your position frequently.

Ask for Help

If you're uncomfortable at your workstation, or you've suffered injury, seek out an ergonomic evaluation from your employer. Your employer may provide ergonomic evaluations to correct an unhealthy workstation by recommending specific equipment, or by making adjustments.

- By Dustin G.

Michelle Rex-Murphy, an ergonomics specialist at Partners HealthCare, discusses how to create an ergonomic workstation to increase comfort, avoid injury, and maximize productivity.

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