

Article: WORKING AT WELLNESS

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Work can make you sick! True, this is not a ground-break-ing statement but here we are talking about your body, not your mind. Here's a guide on how to take care of yourself at work.

"Every body is different," says physiotherapist Judith Gould. "Some bodies are extremely flexible, others very stiff, some have pre existing injuries and others don't yet feel the damage being done to them. Whatever the case, and ergonomically sound work environment will help to maintain a good posture which, in turn, decreases physical stresses and strains. Better postural awareness will help to avoid future problems, too."

It might be hard enough fitting time for exercise into your life as it is, but Gould says paying attention to how we carry ourselves at work will help us get, and keep fit. "Spending too long in one position, as people often do at work, isn't healthy. Whether you're sitting still at a desk or standing most of the time, muscles, joints, bones are internal organs such as the lungs and the digestive system pay the price."

Gould suggests paying close attention to desk, chair, computer and mouse positions, as well as ventilation, temperature, lighting and noise. "If any or all of these things are not right for you, it will affect your posture. Then you leave work and play sports without stretching; read without moving your neck for a long period of time or paint, knit or play computer games without considering the damage done by the repetitive action. You simply reaffirm your poor work posture."

Change is as good as an armrest

The old saying 'Change is as good as a rest', applies. "Change your posture as frequently as possible," says Gould. "Whenever you're sitting make sure your bottom is right back in the chair with your spine gently pressed against the back, feet flat on the floor and don't cross your legs. If you're in a meeting, use the chair's armrests but make sure your shoulders aren't lifted."

RESTORE IMPROVE MAINTAIN EDUCATE

Similar advice can be applied when standing. "Think of your foot as a tripod - little toe, big toe and heel - with your weight evenly balanced on these three points and between both feet. If you have to stand for long periods of time, regularly shift your weight gently from one foot to the other, or rock forwards and backwards with your feet shoulder-width apart and parallel." Care should be taken not to lock the knees, and to keep the head and neck aligned - not protruding forward as is most often the case.

If your work ever requires lifting, Gould says maintain in natural spine alignment is essential. The abdominals should be gently drawn in to support the back. You should bend at the hip and knees, and draw the load close to your body.

"When it comes to work bags and briefcases, it's important to remove all the things you don't need. Too much weight directly affects the neck. Handbags are best carried by hand, not over the shoulders. You should alternate sides, too. Backpacks should be carried on both shoulders and fit snugly against the spine. When these are too heavy, the head and shoulders tend to protrude forwards."

Meet you at the water fountain

Hydration is another key factor in wellness at work. Even when exercising, people usually don't drink enough. Gould argues: "At work a person may not feel the need to drink but they're still sweating and of course air conditioning is very drying. The general rule seems to be about a litre of water a day. Walking to the water fountain and bathroom are great ways to break a static posture, too."

Another consideration is proper illumination to prevent eyestrain and general fatigue. Gould says lighting should be full spectrum which simulates the visible and ultraviolet (UV) spectrum of natural light. "Studies have been done that compare work situations. Workers who have full spectrum lamps have increased oxygen uptake, increased ability to absorb vitamin D and calcium, improved muscle use and decreased heart rate. Glare control is vital, too. Windows are a major source of glare in most offices. Adjustable shades, curtains or blinds should be used to control light levels throughout the day and filters should be fitted on screens to reduce glare and reflections."