

Wellbeing at work (desk based)

The purpose of this educational piece is to reduce the risks associated with desk-based tasks.

The four main areas that pose the highest risk with this type of work are:

- 1. Musculoskeletal (MSK) problems,**
- 2. Visual problems,**
- 3. Stress and fatigue**
- 4. Being too sedentary**

Addressing these risk factors can also reduce the likelihood of you developing obesity, type II diabetes, and cardiovascular problems.



Musculoskeletal problems

Your body is designed to move, it is not designed to stay still for extended periods of time. Movement lubricates your joints and changes where your weight falls through your body.

As you move, your body releases natural oils into your joints, allowing them to move more easily. Staying still therefore can cause joint stiffness.

Being sedentary can also cause muscular aches and pains. Although it may not seem that way, sitting requires your postural muscles to be switched on. Extend this over a period of a working day or week, be it while sitting at your desk, in your car or on your sofa, these muscles are in constant use.

Imagine picking up a box. Holding this box for a few minutes is easy. But try holding this box all day. Your arms will ache!

Staying in one posture places your weight constantly through the same structures of your body. While your body is designed to take loads through it, it isn't designed to take these loads on the same area over long periods of time.

Pull your little finger back. Holding it in this position for a few minutes may feel ok, but hold it there for a whole day and it will start to hurt.

Just because you can't see these stresses like you can a skin cut, doesn't mean they do not exist.

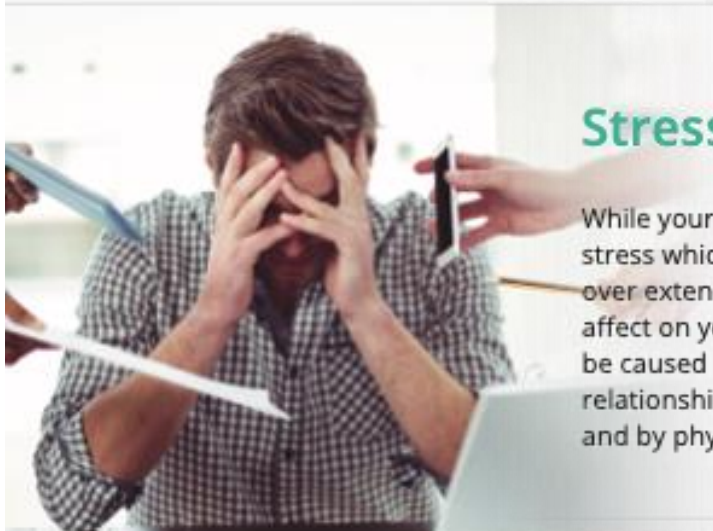
Visual problems

Sitting at a desk for long periods of time can take its toll on your eyes. Looking at a computer focuses your vision on short distances. Your eyes focus by the use of muscles. Just like with any other muscle, these muscles become tired. This can lead to any number of symptoms including blurred vision, dry eyes and headaches.



Stress and fatigue

While your body is designed to have short bursts of stress which can help you to get a task done, stress over extended periods of time will have a detrimental affect on your body. Stress and fatigue at work can be caused by emotional factors, such as poor working relationships or work load (both too low and too high), and by physical factors such as prolonged pain.



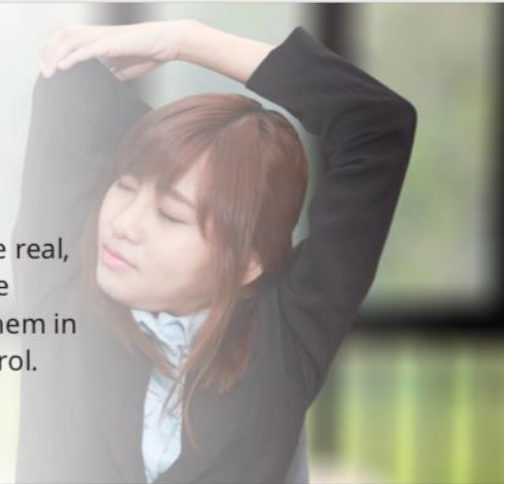
Being too sedentary

This can be a challenging aspect of office work to improve. Being too sedentary is not only associated with musculoskeletal issues as noted, but also medical problems such as heart disease and more. This is the subject of a whole discussion in itself.


It may not seem that way, but all of these risk factors are linked together. For instance, poor vision can make you sit poorly causing back or neck pain which in turn causes stress.

What can I do?


The first step you need to take is to realise that these risks are real, and unless you take action yourself, they will not go away. The second step is to recognise the early warning signs and 'nip them in the bud', rather than letting things escalate beyond your control.



When it comes to your joints and muscles, it is vital you move regularly. Whether this is by doing stretches at your desk, or simply getting up to make a drink, the aim is to do this before you become aware of any aches and pains. By the time you are aware of it, the damage has already begun. Guidelines say **for every 30 minutes spent sitting, 2 minutes should be spent moving**. The gist is, moving little and often is far better than one long mid morning break and one long mid afternoon break.



Minimise the strain on your eyes: check you have the correct display screen equipment, and have your eyes regularly checked to ensure you do not need glasses, or a change in your prescription. Don't be afraid to adjust the brightness settings on your screen, and the height and angle.



Perhaps harder to recognise is stress and fatigue on the body. Ask for a work station assessment to ensure your desk set-up does not cause you unnecessary pain, and move frequently. Have regular, open meetings with your manager to discuss your work load. If you can, open up to a colleague or friend about challenges at work.

“Your employer wants you to do a good job, and that means happy staff. Don't be afraid to speak up about any of these concerns.”

Keyboard Exercises

The Twist

Loosens back, waist, neck, and shoulder muscles.

Sitting firmly with feet flat on floor, gradually twist body to right and turn as if to talk to someone sitting behind you. Gently hold that position for 10 seconds with head falling over shoulder and arms loosely around back of body. Gradually return to the front and then repeat by turning to the left.



Picking apples

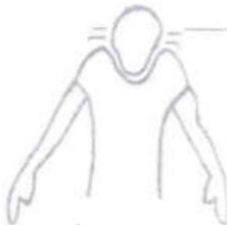
Releases muscle tension in shoulders, back and arms.

Inhale, raise arms above head. Imagine an apple tree just above your hands. Stretch and reach for the apples with one hand and then the other. Breathe out as you stretch. Bend and drop hands to the floor – rag doll style.

Arm Lock

Release neck, shoulder and arm tension.

With your fingers clasped behind your head keep elbows straight out to the side with your upper body in a good, aligned position. Now think of pulling your shoulders together to create a feeling of tension throughout upper neck and shoulder blades. Hold feeling of tension for 8-10 seconds, and then relax. Do several times. This is good to do when shoulders and upper back are tense or tight. Repeat with hands locked on forehead, by pushing forehead into hands.



The Shrug

Great for an instant reliever....anytime.

With arms hanging loosely at your sides, slowly lift up your shoulders, then let them drop as if to shrug off the cares of the day. Repeat several times. Breathe in as you raise your shoulders, exhaling as you let them drop.

Shoulder Stretch

Improves flexibility in arms, back etc.

Bring your right hand to your upper back from above. Bring your left hand to your upper back from below and hook fingers of your two hands. Repeat to the other side. Benefit – it reduces tension and increases flexibility.



Ergonomics at work

Good Posture

Sitting

- ✓ Back upright with a natural "S" curve through your spine - hips slightly higher than your knees
- ✓ Shoulders relaxed
- ✓ Forearms horizontal
- ✓ Feet flat on the floor



Standing

- ✓ Natural "S" shape curve of your spine maintained
- ✓ Shoulder relaxed back and down
- ✓ Feet hips width apart with weight evenly through both legs
- ✓ Head central, not tilting forwards or backwards

Avoid

- ✗ Slumping
- ✗ Lowering your chair
- ✗ Sitting or standing unevenly for long periods
- ✗ Leaning forward
- ✗ Twisting
- ✗ Hunching your shoulders



Key:

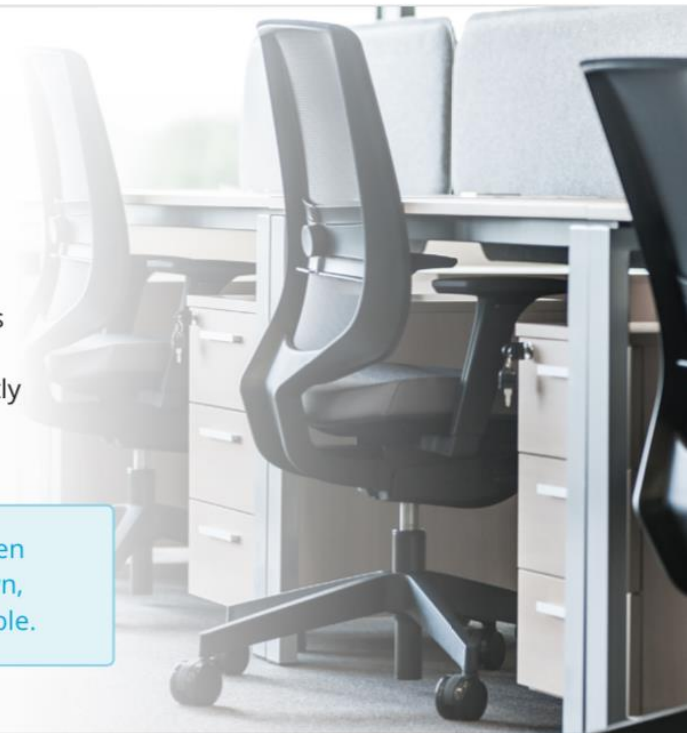
Move regularly. No matter how good your posture, even this can become painful after some time. Take breaks little and often, rather than one long break.

Work station

Having both an adjustable desk and chair are important to ensure you can set your workstation up to a point that fits you.

Adjust your chair so that when your buttocks are right at the back of your chair, your feet rest flat on the floor, and your hips are slightly higher than your knees.

Note: adjust your desk to ensure that when your shoulders are relaxed back and down, your forearms rest horizontally on the table.



If you aren't able to adjust your desk, move your chair to a position that allows you to sit at your desk comfortably, and get a foot rest to place your feet on.

You may have an adjustable seat and/or backrest. Ensure your seat is not tilted too far forward, and your back rest fits comfortably into the small of your back, supporting a slight curve. Make sure the front of your chair does not press into the back of your legs as this can restrict your circulation.

You may have armrests on your chair. If so, make sure that they are at a height that allows you to rest your forearms on them, without having to slouch or even hunch your shoulders.

Many armrests can actually be a hinderance if it means you cannot move your chair in close enough to your desk. It may be worth removing them if so.

Keep a tidy work space. Not only does this mean physically you can sit at your desk as optimally as possible, but psychologically it helps with managing stress levels.

Equipment

Be flexible with your desk arrangement. Move your equipment around depending on the task in hand. If you are going to spend a lot of time on the phone, ensure it is close at hand. If your task requires you to be more computer based, ensure your keyboard and mouse are in the correct position.

Your keyboard should be positioned directly in front of you with your wrist and forearms supported on the table. This helps to prevent forearm and wrist aches and pains.

You'll often see people reaching for their mouse, so ensure it is positioned near to the end of your keyboard so that you do not have to move your arm too much to reach it.



Screen and document holder

Make sure you sit directly at your computer.

Your screen should be positioned around arms length away from you. When looking at the screen your head should be in a neutral position (neither tilted forwards nor backwards). If it is not, adjust the height of your screen accordingly.

Your document holder ideally sits directly below your screen to ensure you are not having to turn your head from one way to the other. If you are a touch typist, you may wish to raise your document holder to be a little higher as you will spend more of your time looking at it.

Eyes

Look away from your screen regularly to avoid straining your eyes. Keep your screen clean from dust and debris, and don't be afraid to adjust your screen settings or zoom in and out as and when you need to.



STS

Many work places are starting to embrace sitting and standing desks. These allow you to sit for some periods of the day, and then adjust your desk to be able to stand. This helps employees to move more regularly, lowering their risk of cardiovascular problems, musculoskeletal aches and pains and other related complications.

If you have one of these desks, alternate periods of sitting and standing little and often, eg, sit for 30 minutes, stand for 30 minutes. This is far better than half a day sitting then half a day standing as these are still significantly long periods of time.

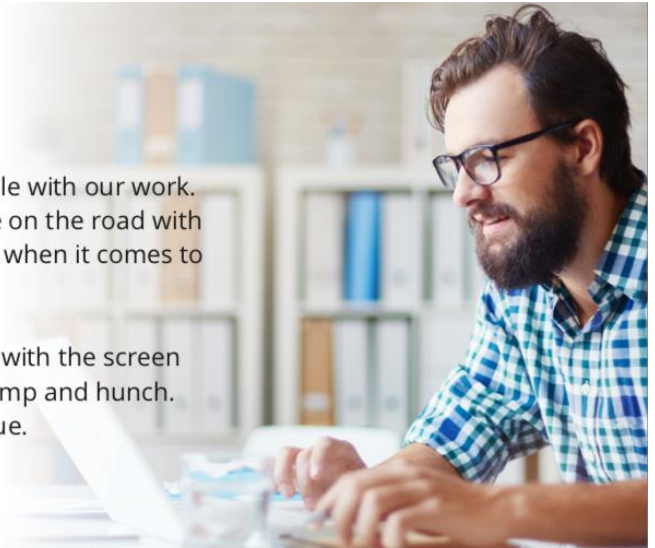
Remember: when you stand up you may need to adjust your equipment positioning and height so ensure you take the time to do this.



Laptops

Many of our jobs require us to be more portable with our work. Laptops fulfil an excellent role of letting you be on the road with your job. There are down side to this however, when it comes to your wellbeing.

Laptop computers force us into poor postures with the screen being fused to the keyboard, forcing you to slump and hunch. Tablets and smartphones present a similar issue.



Try to avoid long periods of time working on any of these devices. If your laptop is your only computer, get a separate keyboard, mouse and a laptop stand. These do not have to be expensive, but will allow you to achieve the same ergonomic set-up that you would with your desktop computer.

If working on your laptop or tablet is unavoidable, ensure you find the most suitable place to work, and take more regular breaks as this poor posture will cause issues much quicker than a good posture.



Some employees have to carry their laptops and other work documents with them fairly regularly. If this is the case, ensure you carry it in a rucksack wearing both straps. This prevents asymmetrical leaning postures and frees up your hands.

If using a phone consider a headset. Holding the phone between your ear and your shoulder quite quickly aggravates musculoskeletal aches and pains.

Environment

Make sure your working environment is as optimal as possible. Poor temperature, whether that's too hot or too cold, can increase your likelihood of stress and physical aches and pains. It can also affect your concentration as can noise, be it from a colleagues or your own music.

Poor lighting will strain your eyes. Make sure there isn't a bright light coming from any angle as this can cause unnecessary strain. Make sure there is enough space between you and your co-worker to be able to utilise your desk most effectively.