

Back Pain in the Work Place - Office Furniture

- ◆ Make your computer back-friendly
- ◆ If you use a laptop use a separate keyboard and mouse
- ◆ Take care with your chair
- ◆ Keep moving

Make your computer back-friendly

Sitting badly in front of a computer for hours on end is storing up trouble. The body can tolerate being in one position for only a short period of time before it feels the need to adjust. Positioning monitor, keyboard, and mouse, correctly can help to ensure good computer posture and a proper chair is essential. Repetition – performing the same movement over and over again – can also lead to muscle fatigue or injury, especially if your body is badly positioned.

Here are some ways to keep your computer and back in harmony.

- ◆ Look straight ahead. Make sure your monitor is directly in front of you at arm's length. You shouldn't need to turn your head at all to see the screen properly. When you're working on a document, the top line of text should be just below eye level and you'll look down slightly to read the text in the middle of the screen. Don't forget that if you change the position of your chair, you need to adjust the monitor as well.
- ◆ Keyboard in front. Your keyboard should be directly in front of you. It sounds obvious, but it's not unusual to see people twisting around to use a keyboard that's off-centre. Your shoulders should be relaxed with your upper arms free at your sides. Turn your chair sideways to check that your elbow is level with the spacebar for the correct height.
- ◆ Avoid 'mouse shoulder'. Putting the mouse too high or too far away means that the upper arm is forced away from the body when you use it. This puts the shoulder in an awkward position and places strain on the muscles. If the position is held for a long period of time, the entire "mouse" side of the body is affected, from the neck to the upper back. Make sure you can use your mouse without stretching and with your elbow comfortably bent. Adjustable height keyboard/mouse trays allow the mouse to be placed conveniently beside the keyboard.
- ◆ Using laptops for long periods should be avoided without a separate keyboard, mouse and raised screen.

Take care with your chair

- ◆ By law office chairs (those used at workstations) must meet a certain minimum standard. They must be stable – the classic office chair with five legs in star shape. They must allow the user easy freedom of movement and a comfortable position – this means that the height must be adjustable and the seat back is adjustable in both height and tilt; ideally the seat back should move independently of the seat to allow for a more comfortable position.
- ◆ When you're seated, your thighs should be at right angles to your body or sloping slightly down. If your chair is properly adjusted your feet should be firmly on the floor, but if it's more comfortable, use a footrest. The basic rule is to plant your feet on the floor and support your back.

Keep moving

- ◆ Never forget that the human body is not designed to sit for long periods, even in the best posture. Don't lock yourself into a position for long stretches of time. Get up and move around. Shift your position often, at least every 45 minutes - every 20 minutes is even better - and stretch.
- ◆ Use telephone calls as an excuse to move. Stand up to answer them. Set the timer on your computer to remind you to get up, stretch and change position

RELEVANT INFORMATION

BackCare factsheet – Exercises for Office Workers <http://www.backcare.org.uk/405/Information-sheets.html>