
Advice on posture and breaks at work

Many of us spend long periods of time working at a desk. If we do not sit properly, take regular breaks and adjust the furniture and equipment this can contribute to muscular and joint discomfort and pain.

- sitting for long periods without adequate breaks or variety of work tasks may contribute to back pain
- headaches, neck ache, shoulder and arm pain can all be made worse by the way people use computers
- using a keyboard or mouse can contribute to muscle fatigue, as well as aches and pains in shoulders, wrists and hands

There are also factors outside the workplace that can contribute to common aches and pains, for example sports and hobbies can also be an issue. In addition, smoking and lack of exercise have been proved to increase the risk of an individual developing back pain.

Prevention is better than cure

Research shows that taking frequent short breaks (micro-breaks) is more effective in preventing aches and pains, than a single longer break in the middle of the day. It is important to remember that during these short breaks, you must move your body to maintain your blood circulation. Breaks as short as 20 seconds in length are better than no break at all.

Most jobs provide opportunities to take regular breaks away from your desk, for example to do filing, photocopying or to send a fax; make sure you use every opportunity to move about. If there are no natural breaks in your job it is important that you plan opportunities to move away from your desk regularly for a stretch, a change of posture and to rest your eyes.

Your working posture is important

Try to maintain a good posture by not slumping in your chair, leaning forward over a desk or twisting to view your computer screen. Adopt a relaxed and supported posture when sitting. Make the effort to adjust the chair you sit on at your desk so that it is comfortable for you. Remember that there is no perfect posture; the more often you adjust your chair for comfort and support, the better.

Using a keyboard and mouse

Intensive use of a keyboard and mouse without breaks should be avoided. In particular try to limit the time you spend using the mouse as this concentrates activity in one hand and arm, try and find out about keyboard shortcuts, clickless software or 'hot keys' for the software you use.

Make sure you have your mouse within easy reach so you can keep your arm relaxed when you use it. Again take frequent breaks, even short pauses to relax your arm can help.

Some Tips and Strategies on taking breaks

- Return some e-mails with a telephone call or by going to speak to a colleague if they work in the same building.
- Use the stairs instead of the lift, if you are in a very large building start with one or two floors at a time
- Stand up to make or receive some telephone calls in order to have a break from sitting
- Move your printer so that you have to stand up and walk a few paces to reach it
- If you have meetings to attend, see if they can be arranged for the middle of the day to break up the time spent at your desk.
- Take a walk at lunch time, encourage colleagues to join you
- Ask your colleagues to help by reminding you to take a break
- Get up regularly to make a drink or fetch a glass of water.
- Set an alarm – e.g. set your mobile phone alarm to remind you
- Place coloured dots around your workstation e.g. on your phone or computer. Every time you see a coloured dot, stop for 20 seconds and MOVE.
- Use a computer package to remind you – there are several on the market.