



OFFICE ERGONOMICS

WORKSTATION QUICK FIXES

There's no such thing as the perfect table or chair—not one that suits every single person anyway. If your desk has you distressed, here are some simple ways to set it (and you) up for the better

By BENITA SEN

You're sick of hearing just how important the "right equipment" is, and hunting down these elusive pieces of ideal furniture has given you a headache. As for your desk at work, that's not something you are allowed to change on a whim. But then, doctors say there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Here are small, practical changes that can make a big difference.

Sit up and take notice

Harshvardhan Hegde, consultant and head of the department, orthopaedics and spine surgery, Artemis Health Institute, Gurgaon, says: "Sit with your back straight, shoulders back, buttocks touching the back of your chair." He has suggestions on what to do when you are not using a back support or lumbar roll:

- Sit at the edge of your chair and slouch completely
- Draw yourself up, accentuating the curve of your back
- Hold for a few seconds
- Relax the position slightly

The right angle

Elbows, knees, hips, ankles and wrists should form angles of 90 degrees or slightly less. To refer to printed material as you type, use a document holder. This minimizes head movement and prevents a crick in the neck.

Sit directly facing your monitor. Even a slight angle twists your spine, leaving you with painful neck, back and shoulders.

An eye to your future

Just 2 hours at the keyboard

can bring on eye problems, says Ramesh Murthy, consultant, LV Prasad Eye Institute, Hyderabad. Some 50-90% of computer users suffer from eye strain, headaches, dry eyes and blurred vision. In children, it can even cause myopia.

Make sure your eyes are 45-60cm from the screen and level with the top third of the monitor. If you wear bifocals, though, angle the monitor lower, in line with your lenses.

See that no light, natural or artificial, bounces off the monitor. Get a flat-screen monitor, draw the blinds or simply angle the monitor to avoid glare.

Also, black font on a white ground is kindest to the eyes.

Workout for work

1. Sedentary? Change your position every 45-50 minutes.
2. Stretch gently (see exercises, right) every hour, on the hour.
3. Every half-hour, take a blink break—20 fast ones. Cup hands over eyes for a minute.
4. "Walks to the photocopy machine, water or coffee dispenser, printer tray or the boss' desk are simple and adequate ways to prevent repetitive stress injury," says Rajiv Thukral, consultant (orthopaedics), Max Super Specialist Hospital, New Delhi.

Even after office, exercise helps you face desk challenges better. Pradeep Sharma, consultant orthopaedic surgeon at Rockland Hospital, Delhi, recommends swimming, yoga and aerobics to ward off spondylosis. If problems persist, though, see a specialist and request a physiotherapist's intervention.

Write to us at

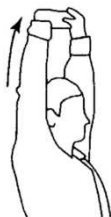
businesslife@livemint.com

The laptop
You can't have it the ideal 18 inches from your face and still keep it on the lap or use the built-in keypad. It's a recipe for neck muscle stiffness (fibromyalgia), early cervical spondylosis and back pain. Setting the laptop further back on a table or bunch of books (see right) helps, plus a separate USB keyboard and a mouse.

Cellotape
Castor coverings and sharp edges on chair seats and legs can tear clothes and even the skin around your ankles. Choose a chair with smooth wheel covers. Can't change the chair? Soften the edges with layers of transparent cello-tape to save your skin and sanity.

Chair height
First adjust the levers (or use seat cushions) to get arms level with keyboard. Then raise the monitor to eye level if needed. Feet far from grounded now? See right!

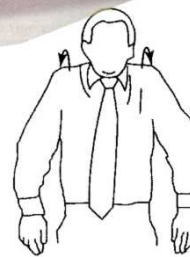
The (hourly) desk stretch



Stand up and stretch your back, reaching up towards the ceiling whenever you start to feel tired. Also make it a habit to look up towards the ceiling as often as you can, even while sitting.



Rotate head from side to side slowly, as though saying 'No'. Do this 5-10 times, turning the head as far as you comfortably can. Now tilt back to look at the ceiling and nod forward to bring chin to chest as many times.



Rotate your shoulders to prevent stiffness. Roll them forward 10 times, and then roll them backward 10 times. Complete full circles if you can, and then vigorously shake your hands out at the wrists.



Cushion
To avoid stiffness, back pain and spondylosis, your chair should not only curve to match your spinal contour but also support the whole length of your back, right up to your shoulders. If you can't get an exact match of curvature or have a low-backed chair, a high-backed straight chair may be better. Adapt with a tall, supple back cushion.

Arm rest
Ideally your forearms should be supported on armrests, elbows at 90 degrees and close to the body (not sticking out to the sides), wrists dorsiflexed (slightly bent back) to avoid carpal tunnel syndrome. But if the armrests are pushing your shoulders up, that's a pain in the neck. Take them right off!

Newspaper
Direct blasts from the air conditioner worsen any aches and pains, and dry out eyes, irritating them. If you cannot move and the housekeeping folks won't cooperate, deflect the vent or block it with newspaper.

Stack of books
The top of your computer screen should be 3-4 inches above eye level to save your neck and upper back from spasms and spondylosis. That can be a tall order if it's a fixed height monitor or a laptop. Thankfully, a smart stack of books should solve that.

Box files
A chair that doesn't support your legs can leave you with painful knees and ankles. Adjust it so your feet rest comfortably on the ground. If you cannot adjust the chair or are short (having your feet on the floor puts your arms and head at the wrong level), bring in a footrest. Adjust it so that the ankle bends slightly downward (plantarflexed). A box file will cost you less than Rs50!

Exercise 1: Tilt your head as though trying to touch your shoulder, and then the other way, going as far as comfortable. Optionally, repeat while resisting the motion with your hands. Do 5-10 repetitions of each set.

Exercise 2: Loosen and limber the shoulders and neck. Try to push the head backwards while you resist with your clasped hands; then place your hands against your forehead and push forward. Hold each position for a count of 5.

Exercise 3: Bend backward and then also stretch forward carefully whenever you feel tired, or at least after every hour of sitting at your desk. And then, take a brisk walk right around the office, if you can.

Exercise 4: Flex all your joints—ankles, knees, wrists and elbows, as well as shoulders and hips. Do simple extensions and curls of all limbs, and you should have taken care of them all, 5-10 repeats each should do it.