

## ***ErgoGirl's Top 5 Most Egregious Office Ergonomic Crimes!***

**Do your shoulders ache?**

**How 'bout your upper back between your shoulder blades?**

**Your neck?**

**Do you have headaches?**

**Low back pain?**

You're not alone!! These are the most common complaints we see in office / computer workers. And it seems to respect no boundaries. So, what's going on? Many of you now have "ergonomic" equipment, right? Well, .... maybe. And maybe that isn't the final answer.

Yes, adjustable equipment is great. We want to be able to fit many sized bodies with many abilities in a work space so that the work space has a long life without causing indirect harm. However, it seems to me that even with great equipment, humans are doing, well... down right ridiculous things with their bodies.

I mean no offense. I have come to believe that people don't know they are doing things that could hurt themselves over time. People show up to work and simply continue to use the work area the way the previous person did, or the way they originally set it up, without ever considering actually changing things so they fit their own bodies better.

So, let me explain 5 of the most egregious office ergonomic crimes we see in our practice.

### **Egregious Crime #1: Constant Sitting**

The back was not engineered to sit most of the day. In fact, our whole body was built to move! It turns out that sitting upright creates higher compressive forces in the lumbar discs (those pieces of soft tissue between your vertebrae that allow you to bend and twist) than standing or walking! Yes, sitting, a seemingly non-physical task, is very hard on your discs!

The picture gets even worse if you're one of those sloucher-types, or one of those folks who sit in a way that flattens what should be a small inward curve of your low back

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(a natural shape known as lordosis). If you fall into one of these categories, then you are adding a squishing/pinching of the front aspect of your discs which can damage your discs over time.

The common area of discomfort is the low back muscles on either side of the spine (because when the spine is not in correct alignment or posture, the surrounding muscles have to work extra hard). Often, it is simply “aching” as a symptom.

- *Solutions:* Sit with your hips all the way back in your chair and your low back curve supported 50% of your sitting time. Stand and/or walk as often as possible! There are more solutions, of course, but this can get you started.

### **Egregious Crime #2: Over-reaching**

The shoulders were not engineered to be held in a forward or outward arm position (this is called forward flexion and scaption, correspondingly), nor to move that way over and over and over and over.... This occurs whenever your elbow is in front of your shoulder joint, or when there is a forward angle at your armpit, from a side view. Think: reaching.

This position or movement wears away at the numerous muscles, tendons and ligaments that hold the shoulder together. Also, it requires the constant or repeated contraction of a large muscle in your upper back/back-of-shoulder/neck area called the trapezius.

So, the common areas of aggravation are the region of the trapezius and/or the front of the shoulder joint. Often, it is simply “aching” as a symptom for the trapezius and “sharp” pain for the shoulder.

- *Solutions:* Move what you access most often closest to you to reduce reach distances - in all directions. Roll your shoulders in BIG circles every hour. There are more solutions, of course, but this can get you started.

### **Egregious Crime #3: Repeated and Awkward Neck Positions**

The neck was not engineered to repeatedly move in the same direction or to remain bent. Rather, it was designed to move and be bent for brief periods.

We see this problem with folks who work from documents that are on the desk or off to the side, or with folks who are not touch typists and have to watch themselves type, or with folks who’s monitors are too high, or with folks who hold the phone between their ears and shoulders.

The neck is part of the spine, but the muscles are smaller than the low back, and some would argue the discs and nerves are more vulnerable here. The common area of

discomfort is the side and back of the neck. However, sometimes pain in the arm is due to problems with the neck.

- *Solutions:* Use the speaker phone or a headset whenever possible. Place your documents right next to the monitor screen and use your eyes instead of your whole head to view them. Have a friend watch you work with your monitor from the side to see if your neck is tipped back or forward; adjust the monitor height accordingly (warning: glasses can be tricky here).

#### **Egregious Crime #4: Over Using the Right-dominant Hand**

The tiny muscles of the right hand, dominant for most people, was not engineered to be used over and over again, thousands of times a day, like they are when we click the mouse. If you add on top of that, writing, 10-keying, operating a phone, stapling, using your keys, etc., then you can see how over the course of a day and a week and a month etc., your little muscles get over-worked.

Death grippers and key slammers are those folks who hold a pen like they have no touch sensation and can't tell if it's even in their fingers and those folks who type with way too much force, like they're mad at the keyboard or something (well, maybe they are....).

Furthermore, those people who move their mouse by moving only the wrist joint are over-working those tendons.

- *Solutions:* Use your left hand for as many grip and pinch functions/tasks as possible, especially for clicking the mouse, at home and at work. Ease up on your grip and your strike force on the keys. Use your larger upper arm / shoulder muscles to move the mouse.

#### **Egregious Crime #5: Unsupported Sitting Posture**

Remember Egregious Crime #1? Well, here's another crime of the spine! The spine needs support or needs to be in its normal curved posture, which some have dubbed an S-curve. [Truthfully, there's one more curve than the letter "s", but...] Anyhow, the primary curves should go as follows: in at the low back, out at the mid/upper back, in again at the neck. And these curves would ideally be present at all times, whether you're walking, sitting, sleeping, dancing, or standing on your head. Of course, in real life, the curves cannot be there 100% of the time. BUT, you can try to minimize the total time the curves are not present.

What we see in the office are folks who sit with their backs forward and away from the chair, in what I call a "forward lean" - either slouched without their curves or upright with their curves. I already explained what happens with slouchers.

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But, maintaining those curves while seated on your own, without a chair back to lean against, requires continuous muscle contractions throughout the trunk. This leads to physiological changes in the soft tissues of the back and neck that contribute to cumulative trauma. The symptoms are usually achiness, stiffness, and fatigue.

- *Solutions:* Sit with your back supported, with its natural curves, at least 50% of your sitting time. That doesn't mean sit still. You can change from a more upright to a more reclined posture, but try to actually relax your body weight into the back of the chair 50% of your sitting time. Place a small hand towel, rolled or folded up, behind your low back so that the curve there is actually supported when you sit. Great for the car, too.

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