

When work is a ●
pain
in the neck

DO YOU BUNCH YOUR SHOULDERS AT WORK DUE TO STRESS OR COME HOME WITH EXCRUCIATING PAIN IN YOUR LOWER BACK OR NECK? YOU'RE PROBABLY ONE OF MANY OFFICE EMPLOYEES WHO NEED TO RE-EXAMINE POOR WORKPLACE ERGONOMICS, WRITES *Katherine Graham*

Office ergonomics statistics are sobering: in the US, over 93-million working days are lost every year due to back pain, and as a result around \$17-million is spent annually on back pain treatment and diagnosis alone. The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality asserts that an additional \$100-billion is spent on lost productivity, employee turnover and other indirect expenses. In the UK, work-related back pain results in almost five million days being lost each year, according to the 2003/4 Labour Force Survey, while the charity BackCare puts the overall cost of back pain – to the British health system, business and the economy – at £5-billion a year.

Although no figures are available for South Africa, we are no less at risk. 'Sitting in an office chair in front of a desk has become one of the most common work-related injuries of today,' says biokineticist Angela Lander. She says the majority of the patients she treats have posture-related injuries from sitting incorrectly at work with very few breaks, compounded by weak postural muscles.

OFFICE ERGONOMICS – WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Ergonomics comes from the Greek words 'ergon', meaning work, and 'nomoi', meaning natural laws. It is used to describe the study of designing objects to be better adapted to the shape of the human body or to correct its posture. This includes chairs which support the spine and desks which have variable heights. In a nutshell, office ergonomics is about better adapting the workplace to suit the worker, and not the other way round.

PREVENTION TIPS

'At work, many people suffer from repetitive strain injuries,' comments Stellenbosch-based physiotherapist Liesel du Toit. 'It could be strain in your shoulders from continually clicking on the mouse. If more than one person uses the same workstation, you should always make sure you set it differently according to your individual needs.'

Most physiotherapists recommend sitting at your desk in such a way that your knees and hips form a 90-degree angle; your forearm-to-elbow relationship should also be 90 degrees. 'Your eyes should look down at the computer screen at a 15-degree angle, otherwise your body is going into a slump position,' says Du Toit. 'If your back is the problem,

then make sure you are sitting in a comfortable seat that has good lower back support. If not, place a pillow or a rolled towel just above the small of your back. Sitting in an uncomfortable seat can also lead to headaches.'

Poor ergonomics in the workplace plays a major role in back, shoulder and neck pain, affirms Rashaad Jakoet, a physiotherapist at the Sports Science Institute of South Africa. 'What you find is that muscles tighten up from discomfort which eventually leads to strain,' he says. 'Your posture at your workstation is

of the utmost importance.' Jakoet employs a multi-faceted approach: 'Firstly, I want to find out what is causing the pain, which is the diagnosis. Then I find out why this condition has developed in order to address the causes. Finally, I seek to find ways to prevent this strain from developing again.'

TREATMENT ADVICE

Jakoet advises soft tissue release for tight muscles. 'This can be done by applying heat as well as the pressure of the physio's hands,' he says. 'A physio will mobilise the cervical and thoracic joints in the spine by means of manual manipulation. Your physio will release trigger points and muscle fascia, which is connective tissue linking the various muscle chains. He or she will work out rehabilitation exercises for you which will involve simple body movements using no weights. This will help with the rehabilitation of core muscles in the lower back, neck and shoulders.'

Lander also emphasises the importance of good posture at work. 'Sit upright, fully back in the seat with your back straight and head up,' she says. 'As far as possible, try to get your ears, shoulder, elbows and hip bone all in a vertical line.' Lander recommends not sitting in the same position for more than 20 minutes at a time. 'Try to get up



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and walk around as often as you can or stretch before sitting down again,' she advises.

TRIED-AND-TESTED METHODS IF YOU'RE IN PAIN, HERE IS A LIST OF YOUR BEST OPTIONS:

Heat

Apply heat to aching muscles. **Natural fibre bags** (featured right) that you heat up in the microwave are perfect for this.

Anti-inflammatories

These will help reduce the inflammation caused by muscular pain. Du Toit recommends using **Transact patches** (featured right), or well-known anti-inflammatories like **Voltaren (from R28,95)** and **Reparil Ice-Spray** (featured right) which reduce swelling and relieve pain.

Massage

Dry needling, trigger point therapy and deep tissue massage can all assist in reducing muscular pain.

ARE YOU AT RISK?

Any office-bound worker who sits in the same position all day is at risk of developing back, shoulder and neck pain. 'Personal assistants and receptionists who clutch the phone on their shoulder while typing often suffer from terrible shoulder pain,' comments Du Toit.

Jakoet believes accountants or IT professionals are prime candidates for developing muscular aches as a result of sitting glued to their computers all day. He also treats many students who have been leaning over textbooks for long periods of time. Other people at risk include manual labourers and medical workers like nurses whose work involves bending, twisting and lifting. ☺

EXPERT



ANGELA LANDER
BIOKINETICIST
Cape Town

'Don't sit in the same position for more than 20 minutes.'



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Unleashing the demons

Angela Lander RECOMMENDS THESE EXERCISES TO STRENGTHEN YOUR CORE MUSCLES AND RELEASE TENSION:

NECK STRETCH

Draw your left ear to your left shoulder using your left arm and hold the stretch for 10 seconds. Repeat on the other side.



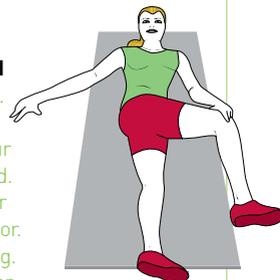
SHOULDER STRETCH

Pull your left arm across your chest using the right arm and open up the shoulder blades at the back. Repeat using your right arm. Alternatively, you can cross your arms in front of your chest and feel your shoulder blades open at the back.



LOWER BACK STRETCH

This is a rotation stretch. Lying on the floor, draw your right leg across your body using your left hand. Make sure you keep your right shoulder on the floor. Repeat using your left leg. Another good exercise for the lower back is to stand with your hands in the small of your back. Extend backwards keeping your legs straight and hold the stretch for a few seconds.



UPPER BACK STRETCH

Lie on your stomach with your arms at your sides palms facing down. While pulling your abdominals in, lift your chest, head and arms off the floor using your upper back muscles, not your lower back. This exercise can also be done using a Pilates ball.

