

ARE YOU FIT FOR THE OFFICE?

With the onset of the compute age, more and more people are spending a higher proportion of their day than in the past in a sitting position, working at a computer. More and more people are also beginning to notice aches and pains throughout and at the end of their working day. Is there a link between office work and joint and muscle strains? If so, can they be avoided and how? If you work in an office and are concerned about these issues, read on.

Most of us will notice a slight ache or pain in one area or another after doing an unaccustomed activity for a while. This usually goes away within a day or so after stopping the activity. However, there are many people who notice that they are getting neck, back, shoulder and arm pain either at work or at the end of their working day. And their working day consists of nothing more stressful than sitting at their desk all day, maybe using a computer. Common complaints are aches in the low back, a tired strained feeling in the neck and top of the shoulders, headaches, tenderness and soreness in the joints of the wrist and hand, and pins and needles in the fingers. The longer the working day and the more stressful the work environment the worse these symptoms seem to be. Usually, the normal break from work in the evening and weekend will be enough to allow these pains to fade. But frequently, as time goes on, the pain will remain present even when the person is resting. At this stage, the unfortunate person will often seek medical advice. They may be diagnosed with any of a number of conditions, such as tendonitis, muscle strain, ligament strain or a condition known as RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury). But what does this mean and how is it possible to get a muscle strain, for example, by just working at a desk? Put simply, it means that small stresses, repeated very frequently and for prolonged periods of time, can cause damage to joints, muscles and other soft tissue.

Let's talk about some of the causes of these stresses. Bad posture is one of the most obvious ones. Excessive sitting is stressful for the low back discs normally, but if the person is slouched down in a soft, unsupportive, low chair with no support for the low back, then the soft tissue is stressed out even more. The neck can be similarly affected by bad posture, as, looking awkwardly at a badly positioned computer screen can strain the muscles, usually in the back of the neck. Another cause of stress can be high repetition of actions, such as hitting the keys on a type writer or computer. The amount of force that is required to depress the keys will also have an effect. Gripping is another activity that can be stressful to the hand and wrist, such as very frequent stapling. All these various stresses (and other too numerous to mention) can traumatise muscles, nerves, joints and ligaments and, over a period of time, can lead to pain.

Can these problems be avoided? The answer is, yes. In most office situations, subtle changes can be made to allow for the adaptation of good working postures and practices. Try to use an upright, firm chair, that is adjustable both in height and back angle. If there isn't a built in back support, use a rolled up towel in the small of the back. Adjust the height of the chair so that the elbows are about 1' above the work surface/desk. If your feet don't reach the floor, use a foot rest to support them. Position the monitor/screen directly in front of you and approximately finger tip distance away. Align the top of the monitor to eye level. Use a document holder to prevent awkward bending of the neck. Take frequent breaks from the position you work in, even if only

for a few seconds at a time. If you are still having discomfort after making these changes, consult your local Chartered Physiotherapist. Not only will he or she be able to treat your pain, but will be trained to give you advice as to how to make your workplace more body - friendly for you.

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