



Is Your Workplace a Danger Zone for Employees?

You have probably heard that “sitting can kill you” and it has probably crossed your mind that for your office staff, sitting all day is a real threat to well-being. Further, poor ergonomics can lead to high priced medical treatment. The question then is, what can you do?

First, remember that sitting isn't the only cause of injury in the office. The tools your workers use, keyboards, mice, and monitors can also create health problems. In 1998, an estimated 3 out of 10,000 employees lost work time due to carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) and that number has been increasing ever since. Many of those who lost work due to CTS were out of work for more than 10 days. The average lifetime cost for a single case of carpal tunnel syndrome, if surgery is required, is over \$90,000 (including both medical costs and lost time from work) and over \$24,000 without surgery according to a recent study by the US Department of Labor. The cost of lower productivity is not included in this number but a computer user experiencing pain puts off their tasks for 5 minutes out of every 15 minutes worked. This lost productivity adds up to over 13 hours per week, on average.

Secondly, know that many of these injuries are preventable when a good ergonomics program is in place. This means that workstations are setup for healthy working conditions and employees are given appropriate education. Education ensures that equipment is used properly and employees participate in behaviors that lower risks, like taking regular stretch breaks or standing part of the day. Office ergonomics reduce worker's compensation claims, lower overall health insurance costs and increase employee productivity, all of which can have a huge positive impact on your organization's bottom line. Further, as an added bonus, employees who are not in pain and who feel their employer is invested in their health and well-being are happier, which in turn reduces employee turnover. The return on investment for ergonomic programs is excellent; according to the Wellness Council of America, three dollars are saved in health care costs for every one dollar invested.

Numerous research reports have shown the value and payback of ergonomics programs. One example, Blue Cross Blue Shield Rhode Island implemented an ergonomics program in March 2000. Changes included installing ergonomic keyboard trays, moving or adjusting desks, changing furniture vendors to those that offered appropriately ergonomic furniture and giving employees a phone headset. First-year results represented a 70 percent decrease in lost workdays and a 25 percent reduction in worker's compensation cases. By the end of the third year, worker's compensation cases had dropped from eight in 1999 to only one by 2002 and lost work days had dropped from 345 to 89 according to the USDOL.



Office Ergonomic Basics

Chairs

The chair is the most critical part of the puzzle. Seek out well-constructed chairs that offer many points of adjustment. Adjustments should include seat depth, seat height, back angle, lumbar support, and arms that are both height and width adjustable. Chairs selected should fit the majority of employees. If you select chairs from one of the manufacturers that offers modularity, then simple modifications such as changing a seat pan or chair height cylinder can allow for easy adaptation of existing chairs to new employees. Employees that are petite, taller than 6'3" or over 250 pounds will need chairs designed to fit their respective statures.

Keyboards

Keyboards and mice should be as close to the body as possible to minimize reaching and the risk of arms resting on desk edges. For many workers a height adjustable desk and/or an adjustable keyboard tray is recommended to bring the keyboard to a level that allows the arms to be level with the floor when shoulders are in a relaxed position. Monitors should be positioned so they can be easily viewed without straining the neck forward, back, or down and about arm's length away from the eyes. Desk lamps may be needed to provide workers with adequate lighting and can reduce the dependence on harsh overhead fluorescent lighting. Most computer workers will benefit from an ergonomic keyboard and mouse.

Laptops

Laptop computers present significant ergonomic problems because it is not possible to have the keyboard and screen in a healthy position at the same time, thus they should not be used "as is" for long periods of time. These problems can best be handled by elevating the laptop to a comfortable viewing height with a stand or laptop arm and the use of an external keyboard and mouse. Using an external keyboard and mouse has the added benefits of being able to use a good quality ergonomic keyboard with full sized keys, softer key pressure and healthier positioning.

For information on office ergonomics or to arrange an assessment at your worksite, contact Mary Hughes, Fort HealthCare's ergonomic coordinator at (920) 568-5018. More information is online at **FortHealthCare.com/HealthWorks**.

