Workplace Health and Safety Bulletin

WORK SAFE ALBERTA

Sitting and Preventing Back Pain

Remember being told to "Sit up straight!" at school? Or more recently, seeing illustrations recommending you sit bolt upright at your desk? This idea of "correct" posture originated with a surgeon in 1884 — and for no particularly good reason. In fact, recent studies confirm that for most of us, sitting upright places too much pressure on our backs and can cause discomfort in our shoulders and neck. This posture can also cause problems for the lower back.

As well, poor layout of our work areas can force us to unnecessarily lean, twist, and reach — excessive movements that can lead to upper back and neck pain. A computer screen or work surface placed either too high or too low may force us into awkward and unhealthy postures.

> Poor layout of our work areas can force us to unnecessarily lean, twist, and reach.

What to do?

- *Rearrange your work area*. Reduce excessive reaching movements by placing the most important and frequently needed items nearby.

- *Adjust your chair*. For the best posture, your feet should rest flat on the floor. Adjust the back of the chair so that you can fit two fingers between the back of your knees and the front lip of the chair.

- *Take the load off your back*. Evidence shows that a slightly reclined position reduces the pressure on the discs between our vertebrae by transferring weight to the backrest.

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- *Support the lumbar region* — that's the curve at the lowest portion of the back. A lumbar support puts your lower back in a healthy arch and takes even more pressure off the discs. If your chair doesn't have a lumbar support, or the support you have is inadequate, use a commercial lumbar roll, a rolled towel or sweater, or a small, firm pillow. When *compressed*, the support should be approximately 40 to 50 mm thick. Find the place to put the support by standing up and stretching backwards. You'll naturally place the palms of your hands in the perfect spot — the hollow of your back.

- *Squirm in your chair*. Cross and uncross your legs. Shift from side to side. Slide forward and back. Stand while speaking on the telephone. All of these activities help muscles relax and squeeze and unsqueeze the discs so they remain healthy.

- *Take regular breaks from sitting*. Build tasks into your routine that take you away from your desk. Photocopying, bathroom breaks, and talking with co-workers are activities that get you up and moving.

Remember that there's no perfect posture for everyone. Follow the suggestions that work best for you.

Squirm in your chair.

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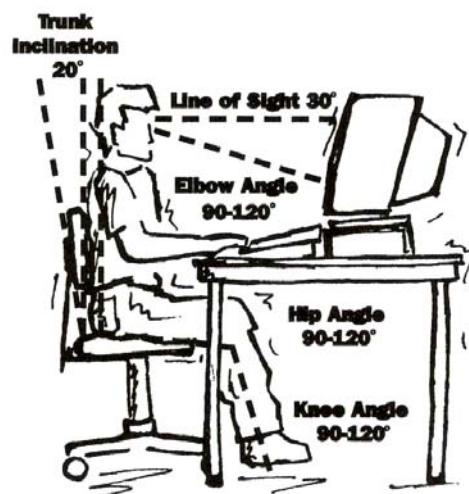
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