first**hand**news

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Surveys indicate that almost half of all office workers have frequent pain or stiffness in their necks and shoulders

sitting **on the job**

As the workforce has shifted from factories to offices, the incidence of back pain has increased dramatically. Researchers blame this increase on one simple activity that we do all the time – sitting.

Our bodies were not designed to sit for long periods of time. We were made to move. Almost everyone who sits for long periods of time will develop back pain, even with the use of an ergonomic chair. It's not uncommon to develop other problems as well. Surveys of office workers indicate that about half of all employees have frequent pain or stiffness in their necks and shoulders. Repetitive strain injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome are becoming more common and about 10% of keyboard users experience wrist pain or discomfort. Who would have thought that sitting could wreak such havoc on your body?

Your body needs movement to operate effectively. If you have a sedentary lifestyle or sit for most of the day, your body is going to start complaining. You have to move. When your muscles contract, you assist the flow of blood and lymph fluid through your body. The muscles act as a pump. If they don't contract regularly the blood in your extremities pools and you may get swelling of your feet and hands or those parts may just feel cold because the blood circulation is insufficient.

When you sit for long periods of time certain postural muscles, like your shoulder muscles, become overworked. These will tend to become short and tight from overuse whereas other muscles like your gluteals, abdominal and mid-back muscles, will become weak and atrophy.

micro-break

Lean back in your chair and stretch your arms up and your legs out. Wiggle your fingers and toes. Then do circles with your ankles and wrists. Continue to reach up and back, close your eyes, smile, breathe in deeply and out slowly several times.

In the short time it takes to perform this micro-break, you have released the lock of your visual and mental tasks, stretched away muscle tension built up in your hips, spine, and arms and refreshed your body with extra oxygen by expanding your rib cage. You also improved your posture as well as the circulation of blood through your legs and arms. All this in less than 30 seconds!

Caution: Before trying this micro-break, be sure to check your chair for stability so that you don't tip over.

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help for the **deskbound**

If you are stuck behind a desk all day, there are a number of things you can do to keep your body healthy.

Make sure you're using the chair to support your body. For example, most people never use the backrest properly to support the low back. As they sit down they aim their bottom at the middle of the seat. Then to reach the backrest they slouch backwards. Are you guilty of this? If you are, start aiming your sitting bones toward the back edge of the chair as you sit down.

It's very important to take frequent breaks. Consider this study: Researchers had subjects sit in chairs as they measured tension in their back muscles. After about twenty minutes of sitting, their back muscles started spontaneously tensing up even though the chairs were adjusted to completely support their backs!

Taking breaks will keep your muscles from tightening up. Use the 20/20 rule: take a twenty second break at least every twenty minutes. Use these "micro-breaks" to stand up, stretch out and take a couple of deep breaths. If possible vary the tasks you do throughout the day so that you don't work at one single activity for too long. For example, if your job involves typing and filing, alternate the tasks every half-hour.

Get a regular massage to help you get rid of accumulated tension, stretch out overworked and tight muscles and to get your circulation going.

Lastly, be sure to exercise regularly. It is vitally important that you balance your inactivity with activity. Try some form of gentle aerobics like running or biking.

Do you get headaches, shoulder pain, or neck pain at work? If you do, here's a short checklist that might help you uncover some of the causes.

❏ Have you had your eyes checked lately? If your eyesight is not 100% you may be straining not only your eyes, but your neck and shoulders. Problems are not always obvious, so make an appointment for a thorough eye examination.

❏ Do you slouch? When you slouch, your head tilts back to see your work properly. This shortens your neck muscles, wears down the joints in your neck and may even compress the nerves that go to your arms.

❏ Do you have adequate support for your arms and wrists? Armrests will take the stress off your shoulder muscles which normally carry the weight of your shoulder girdle and arms. Also consider using a wrist support.

❏ Do you hold the phone between your ear and shoulder? One client who spent a whole day on the phone developed a trigger point in his neck that sent pain into his chest. He thought he was having a heart attack! If you spend a lot of time on the telephone, invest in a headset.

❏ Is your work in front of you? If you spend most of your day looking at a computer screen, make sure it's in front of you and not positioned to the side so that you have to turn your head to see it.

❏ Do you use a document holder? Document holders keep your papers next to your computer screen so that you don't have to twist your neck around trying to look at printed material that's lying flat on the desk.

❏ Do you take frequent breaks? Take frequent short breaks. It's the best thing you can do to prevent your muscles from tightening up.

❏ Do you carry a heavy briefcase or purse? Change sides frequently. Better yet, center the weight over both shoulders by using a knapsack.

❏ Is it time for a stress check? If you feel stressed often, you may need to take a serious look at your lifestyle and explore ideas for reducing your stress level.

❏ Do you breathe? If you don't breathe properly your shoulders and neck muscles will tense up. Make a point to take deep breaths at various times during your workday.

Use regular massage to get rid of accumulated tension

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