



Office ergonomics: key to health and safety in the workplace

To attract and retain the best workers in today's job market, employers need to be aware of the work environment of their employees.

Workplaces are now more aware of workplace health, partly because of the increased number of employees experiencing repetitive strain injuries. As a result, more and more employers are designing effective workplace health and wellness programs, and ergonomics is a key factor in any organizational health and safety program.

Ergonomics: what is it?

Simply stated, ergonomics involves fitting the task to the worker.

An effective ergonomics program in the workplace benefits the worker by

- increasing comfort and job satisfaction, and
- improving productivity and morale.

An ergonomics program benefits the employer by

- improving injury prevention,
- promoting early return to work,
- reducing absenteeism, and
- decreasing costs.

How to set up an ergonomic program

Ergonomics programs educate workers about their jobs and help identify risk factors that can lead to injury.

An effective ergonomics program may include the following:

- training staff (managers, supervisors and employees) around basic ergonomics and hazard-reporting procedures;
- identifying hazards and how to report them;
- implementing effective disability management and return-to-work programs;
- providing access to trained experts (e.g. nurses, ergonomists, occupational therapists, etc.);
- providing access to ergonomic equipment (e.g. an ergonomic mouse or palm and wrist rests); and
- a process for evaluating the ergonomics program.

Tips for the office worker

How the workstation is set up and how workers sit can cause a number of issues for workers.

You can adjust the seat height and depth of most chairs on the market today. These adjustable chairs fit about 95 per cent of the population. When you're first using a chair, try it for at least a few days, then make sure it's adjusted properly for you.

Below are some common ergonomic issues and ways to resolve them.

Incorrect chair height

- Adjust your chair's height so that it reaches your standing knee height. Sit all the way back in the chair and make sure your feet are flat on the floor.

Incorrect chair depth

- When you sit at the back of your chair, two or three fingers should fit between the back of your legs and the front of your chair.

Poor sitting posture

- A slightly reclined position can relieve tension in your lower back. Adjust the chair tilt and lock it in place. Sit toward the back of your chair and ensure that the natural curve in your back is supported. Adjust your armrests to achieve a relaxed arm position. Use armrests between (rather than during) typing sessions.

Lack of seat padding

- Add to or replace your seat cushion so that you have enough padding.

Prolonged sitting

- Take coffee, lunch and micro-breaks throughout the workday. Change your position as often as possible.

Desk or keyboard is too high

- Raise the height of your seat. Ensure that your feet are flat on the floor or on a foot rest. Use an adjustable keyboard tray so that your shoulders can relax.

Armrests are too high

- Adjust your armrest height. If they're not adjustable, remove them.

Mouse and keyboard are on different levels

- Make sure that your mouse is on the same level as your keyboard (i.e. both are on the keyboard tray).

Looking back and forth from papers on your desk to the monitor

- Try a copy or document holder and position documents at the same height and distance as the monitor to avoid repeated neck movements.

Multi-tasking

- If you frequently find yourself holding your phone between your ear and shoulder while you're typing, try using a head set instead.

Incorrect monitor height or distance

- Ensure that your monitor is right in front of you. Your line of vision should be about five to eight centimetres from the top of the screen. Position the monitor 45 to 76 centimetres (approximately one arm's length) away.

Exercise balls

One of the latest office trends has been to replace chairs with exercise balls. Although the balls improve core strength, there are drawbacks to using them instead of an office chair. Although exercise balls are available in a variety of sizes, they are not adjustable and cannot accommodate all workers.

In addition, when they're not in use, these balls sometimes roll around and cause tripping hazards. To get the most support,

stability and adjustability from your office seating, use standard ergonomic office chairs. Always consider potential ergonomic issues when you introduce any new equipment into your workplace.

Taking stretch breaks

Stretching and taking regular breaks can help prevent repetitive strain injuries. Generally, for continuous desk or computer work, one five-minute break per hour is recommended. Consult your health-care provider before beginning a stretching or exercise program.

By following the basic ergonomic suggestions in this article, you'll experience better physical health—and a lower risk of injury—at work, at home and during your leisure time. You'll also be more likely to experience improved morale and better productivity. Effective ergonomics programs are a win-win situation for both employees and employers.

Learn more

[Workers' Compensation Board](#)

A study of workplace ergonomics.

[Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists](#)

Information on ergonomics programs and how to set up your workspace.

[Association of Canadian Ergonomists](#)

Common questions about ergonomics and how to apply it in your workplace.

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