Environmental Health & Safety
Office Ergonomic Tips

Regardless of how "adjustable" a workstation is, all employees should follow the guidelines below. These guidelines are for the average worker and may not be comfortable or applicable to all employees. If employees do not follow these guidelines and they begin to experience discomfort or pain that could be associated with work practices or their workstation, they should begin to follow all of these guidelines to see if their situations improve.

Computer Monitors

The computer monitor should be directly in front of the keyboard, the height should be such that the chin is parallel to the floor and the monitor is approximately an arm's length or more away from the user. To help prevent glare, the screen should be tilted to a 90 degree angle with the overhead lights and in some cases tilting the top of the screen forward slightly will help reduce glare even further (depending on the situation). Avoid positioning computer monitors where the user faces a window, as the bright light coming in from a window can create too much contrast with the computer screen and can cause eye fatigue.

Document Holders

If an employee works from paper documents frequently, a document holder should be used. The holder should be positioned at the same height and distance as the computer screen and as close to the monitor as possible. Placing a reference document on the desk and/or further away from the employee than the screen forces the eyes to refocus every time the document is referenced. This can cause eye fatigue.

Input Devices (keyboard, mouse, etc.)

The keyboard should be positioned so that the hands can access the keys while holding the elbows naturally next to the body and the forearms parallel to the keyboard. The mouse and other input devices should be in close proximity to the keyboard to reduce reaching and shoulder stress. The keyboard or chair should be adjusted so that the forearms, wrists, and hands are in a straight line (neutral position) while using the keyboard.

Typing and wrist rests

Until recently, many people believed that obtaining a wrist rest and constantly resting the wrists on it while typing was acceptable. All employees should make an attempt to keep their wrists off of the desk or wrist rest while typing and only rest their wrists when needed. Resting the wrists on any surface while typing increases the risk of cumulative trauma disorders.

Posture

Proper posture should be maintained while working at a computer workstation. Proper posture includes a 90-degree or greater angle at the hips and knees and the feet resting flat on the floor or footrest. The knee and hip angles should not stay fixed while seated. Employees should vary their seated posture periodically.

The head and neck should be in an upright position, even while on the phone. The shoulders should be relaxed and the elbows hanging naturally next to the body.

Allow ample leg and knee clearance under the desk to maintain proper posture.

Chair

The chair should allow some clearance behind the knees when seated against the backrest. The backrest should be used to provide support for the lower back and if it does not, a lumbar pillow can be obtained to provide adequate support. The chair adjustments should be used to achieve the position described here and above. Armrests are not necessary on a chair and depend on an employee's preference. Adjustable armrests on a chair are not mandatory, but the armrests of the chair should be at a height that will not force the employee to raise or lower their shoulders while resting their elbows on them. It is for this reason, however, that adjustable armrests are ideal, as it allows adjustments for any worker that sits in the chair. M. D. Anderson's Institutional Standard chairs are all equipped with adjustable armrests.

"Microbreaks"

Anytime employees work uninterrupted at the computer for long periods of time they should take microbreaks (two to three minutes) every 45 to 60 minutes. Studies have shown that changing tasks and postures periodically significantly reduces the amount of complaints and symptoms of pain and discomfort associated with repetitive tasks such as computer work. The microbreak does not have to be a rest-break, as the employee could just begin another task that does not require the same posture and position as typing does (i.e. faxing, copying, standing up and using the phone).

Computer use at home

Many employees have a computer at home and use them for extended periods of time in the evening or over the weekend. It is extremely important for employees to apply good ergonomic practices there as well.

Whether employees are at home or work, under most circumstances, if they sit and work in a comfortable, natural position/posture, they should not experience any problems. One of the keys to keeping any serious problems at bay is to constantly be aware of pain or discomfort in the body and to address it as soon as it is noticed instead of waiting until its too late. Call Environmental Health and Safety at 4111 for more details.