

Pain in the Neck?

Do you have a pain in the neck? And no, I don't mean your spouse or when the kids are bothering you endlessly on a rainy day. I'm talking about physical pain in a particular area of your body. Maybe it's not in your neck, but maybe it's in your shoulders, or lower back, or even your wrists and fingers. Do you spend lots of time sitting at the computer? You could be suffering from Repetitive Strain Injury and perhaps it's time to evaluate the ergonomics of your work area.

You've probably heard about both Ergonomics and Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). Ergonomics is the study of the interaction of the body as it relates to your environment while performing a task or activity. RSI is also called Cumulative Trauma Disorder or Occupational Overuse Syndrome (scary names for disorders that can cause serious injury) and is any of a group of conditions resulting from overuse of a tool (such as a computer or anything else that requires repetitive movements).

So what does all that really mean and why do we have problems when we spend lots of time doing certain tasks? Medically speaking, it is a condition which occurs when affected muscles are kept tense for very long periods of time. Poor posture and/or repetitive motions also affect the condition.

So how do you prevent it? The most important thing is to have good ergonomics, good posture and most importantly limit your time in stressful working conditions. Stretches and strengthening exercises can help reduce neck and shoulder muscle tension but it is also important to have a properly set up workspace. A properly set-up workstation can increase productivity and improve your quality of work. Ergonomics not only involves your workspace but it also includes lighting and the tools you use (mouse, keyboard, monitor, telephone, chair, etc) and how it fits to you and the activity you are doing.

To prevent or minimize work-related injuries, it is important to position yourself and the work so that you are seated comfortably and minimize stress on any specific area of your body. Make sure you keep your most frequently used tools within easy reach.

For someone like me who spends hours at the computer because of my job, I have also found some other important tools that can reduce the use of the keyboard and mouse which tend to be the most critical factors in causing repetitive strain injuries. One thing that I've recently started to use is voice activated software. This allows me to speak to my computer thus reducing numerous mouse clicks and keyboard strokes. Another thing I found that helps is a special-needs mouse. Although I continue to use a traditional mouse, my other mouse allows me to vary my activity and not be constantly doing the same thing repetitively.

The key things that are critical to a productive workspace is to remember to take frequent breaks, vary your positions and tasks, and match your tools to your size and preferences.

Click below for some useful resources:

1. Useful computer exercises: http://www1.athabascau.ca/hr/gen_info/ohs/exercise.jpg
2. Workstation Checklist: http://www1.athabascau.ca/hr/gen_info/ohs/workstation.doc
3. Special Needs Computers: <http://www.specialneedscomputers.ca/>