

Working Safely at the Computer

by Amy Rose, PhD from *The Positive Line* products company. Copyright 1993

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Are you at risk?

Over the long term, working at a computer can cause problems such as eyestrain, persistent fatigue, back pain, tendonitis, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, and more. By using ergonomics, you can make adjustments to improve your health and comfort on the job.

Eyestrain

Improper lighting and poor posture can cause eyestrain. Some tips:

- Lower lighting levels to reduce glare and improve screen contrast.
- Place screen at right angle to window to avoid reflections and shadows (Field should be free from glare and reflections).
- Top of screen should be eye level (slightly lower for bifocal wearers).
- Screen should be 15 to 32 inches away, display sharp and steady.
- Sit with ceiling fluorescents parallel to your line of sight and to your side.
- Rest your eyes frequently by focusing on an object at least 20 feet away.
- Blink frequently so your eyes don't get dry.
- Have a document holder so that documents are close to and level with the screen (and documents are properly lit).
- Get regular eye exams. Tell your eye doctor you work at a computer.

Postural Hazards

Certain postures are uncomfortable and hazardous to your health. Working with inadequate back support, your head tilted back or forward, your shoulders hunched your wrists bent, or your feet unsupported may eventually lead to a serious condition.

Reduce Sitting Stress

The right chair helps reduce sitting stress. If possible, your work chair should be:

- Fully height adjustable,
- Support the low back in its natural curve,
- Swivel easily,
- Have a separately adjustable back, a seat with a rounded front edge, 5 feet on casters, and adjustable arm rests which do not interfere with your movements,
- Wrists should be straight and horizontal to your work surface as you type,
- Have a padded wrist rest,
- Have enough knee clearance under the desk or table,
- Feet should be flat on the floor or on a footrest,
- Arms should be loose and comfortable at your sides, and your elbows at right angles as you type,
- Sit back in your chair with your lower back well supported in its natural curve.

A Healthy Work Environment

To protect everyone's health and safety:

- Ventilate adequately; a smoke-free environment is best.
- Control noise, cover or isolate printers and other noisy equipment.
- Remove obstacles and tripping hazards, like open file drawers and equipment wires.
- Position workstations to prevent visual distractions.

Say No to Stress

Good practices on and off the job will keep you healthier and happier:

- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise regularly.
- Eat right.
- See a doctor if you have persistent discomfort or physical problems.
- Stay limber and help prevent sore muscles and joint by doing small exercises.
- Take frequent mini-breaks.

Exercises you can do at your desk

- **Hands and Fingers:** With hands held in front of you, first clench both fists and hold 5 seconds. Then spread fingers as far as you can and hold 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times.
- **Wrists:** With your hands held in front of you, gently rotate your wrists so that fingertips describe circles in the air. Repeat 5 times in each direction.
- **Shoulders:** Stand and let your arms relax at your sides. Then raise your shoulders and rotate them up and back in a circular motion. Repeat up to 5 times. Then change direction.
- **Eyes:** Cup your hands gently over your closed eyes. Hold for one minute.
- **Neck:** Turn your head slowly to the left and hold 5 seconds. Then repeat on right side. Drop chin to chest, hold, then slowly tilt head back as far as possible. Repeat sequence 5 to 10 times.
- **Upper back:** Make sure your chair is stable. With feet flat on floor, clasp hands behind head and slowly arch back, bending head backward. Hold up to 5 seconds.
- **Lower back:** Move chair back from desk. Be sure chair is stable. With feet flat on floor, bend forward slowly as far as you can, reaching for feet. Hold up to 10 seconds. Push yourself back up with leg muscles.
- **Leg Muscles:** In a seated position, with one foot flat on floor, extend the other leg straight in front with toes pointed. Tense leg muscles and hold ten seconds. Relax leg. Repeat with other leg.