

## How to stay safe and healthy while at work

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Since the dawn of humankind, people have used tools to make their jobs easier and safer. Despite the leap from antelope bones and sharpened stones to personal computers and laptops, and though we've moved from caves to cubicles, work-related hazards are still around. In fact, a field of science called ergonomics exists just to study the safety and efficiency of your work environment. Applying ergonomics in the workplace can help reduce stress and eliminate many injuries and disorders caused by bad posture, overusing muscles and repeating the same motions over and over again.

### Work for success at your desk

If you work in an office or use a computer at home, the design and arrangement of your workstation and equipment can impact your comfort, health and productivity. Awkward postures can lead to disorders of the elbows,

shoulders, hands and wrists. One way to reduce your risk is to make sure your workstation is large enough to fit you and the equipment you need to do your job. Take time to adjust your chair — it should have good back support — keyboard and monitor to suit you. Your monitor should be directly in front of you, but at least 20 inches away, with the top line of the screen at or below eye level. Your keyboard should be directly in front of you, too, but at a distance that allows your elbows to stay close to your body, with your forearms approximately parallel with the floor.

Being the fastest typist or most magnificent mouse clicker in the office won't win you any



awards and can, in fact, set you up for a repetitive strain injury.

For starters, ease up on your mouse — don't clutch it so

tightly! And reduce the strain

on your hands by using keyboard shortcuts, such as Ctrl+S to "save" if you use Windows. Also, it's recommended that you position your mouse close to the keyboard and maneuver it with an open, relaxed hand.

### Put your best foot forward

Millions of Americans, including retail workers, mechanics, nurses, construction workers, doctors, cooks, teachers and cashiers, spend many hours on their feet. If you stand for long periods at work, the muscles that support your body will tire, so try to avoid standing in the same position for a long time. If possible, sit down for a few minutes every so often. Or try propping one foot on a stool or box — not too high, you're not a flamingo — for a few minutes, then switching to the other foot. Also, choosing footwear with shock-absorbing insoles can protect you from slips and falls in addition to cushioning and supporting your feet.

### Carry on, but carefully

Though not nearly as much fun as pumping iron at the gym, many American workers, including store clerks, postal employees and



>> Standing for long hours on your feet can cause fatigue, so wear shock-absorbing shoes.

health care professionals, lift heavy objects on a daily basis. According to the National Safety Council, repeated, improper lifting and carrying can cause back strain as well as lead to overexertion of heart and lung muscles, which is the No. 1 cause of non-fatal work place injuries. Keep the object you're lifting as close to your body as possible and lift with your legs, not your back. And don't be afraid to ask someone to help if the object is too heavy to lift by yourself.

### Keep it in drive to stay alive

If you drive a motor vehicle as part of your job, you should be aware that crashes are the leading cause of work-related death. Crashes affect people who drive for a living as well as those who use their personal vehicles during work hours to drive to meetings, make sales calls or visit clients. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, roadway crashes are the leading cause of death for workers in clerical jobs, and the second leading cause of death for executives, sales workers and technicians.

Unfortunately, many workers feel pressured to drive faster or for longer periods, or they feel they have to use cell phones and other distracting technologies while they're behind the wheel. Driving requires your full attention. Don't try to multi-task while you're driving. If it's a long trip, stop and stretch every two hours, or pull over and take a 20-minute power nap.

In 2005, 4.2 million injuries and illnesses occurred in private-sector workplaces

>> For more workplace safety tips, visit [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov) or [www.cdc.gov/niosh](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh)

## Come up for air

Do you ever get so engrossed in your work that you can't remember how long you've been sitting there? Sitting too long in one position can increase your risk of developing a repetitive strain injury and can even cause you to develop a life-threatening blood clot. It doesn't hurt to fidget a bit while you're sitting, and every 20 or 30 minutes get up and walk around to give your body a chance to rest and recover. Visit the restroom, send a fax, chat at the water cooler. You might try doing jumping jacks in your cubicle, if it doesn't distract your neighbors.



American Public  
Health Association