



# Back Basics

☞ Did you know that sitting at your desk all day can put more pressure on your back than standing? Sitting for long hours in one position, working at a poorly designed workstation, or using unsafe job practices—such as trying to move your own office furniture—may lead to backaches in the office. Making simple changes in the design of your workplace or work habits may prevent back strain and help you prevent back problems.

## Back at Your Desk ▾

Evaluate your workplace, chair and work habits and think about ways you can adjust them to maintain a healthy back.

**YOUR WORKPLACE** should be designed to help you avoid long reaches, jerky twisting movements, or awkward postures that can lead to back aches and pains.

- ☞ **Your visual target:** Your visual target is the #1 factor affecting your posture. Make sure that you can easily see the things you look at the most without bending your neck or slouching. Prop reading documents up in front of you or use a document holder for lengthy tasks. If you use a computer, your monitor should be positioned so that the top of the screen is at about eye level (lower for bifocal wearers). A document holder adjustable to screen height can also prevent neck strain.
- ☞ **Easy reach:** Analyze your job tasks and tools. The things you use most often—your mouse, telephone, calculator, in/out box—should be within easy reach. If you use the telephone a lot in conjunction with other job tasks, a light-weight phone headset is advisable.
- ☞ **Waist high:** Avoid awkward reaches or constant bending by storing heavy, frequently used items on shelves or tables at waist height. Keep files that you use most often in filing cabinet drawers that are about waist level.

**YOUR CHAIR** should provide firm back support and promote a balanced, comfortable posture for work activities you perform.

- ☞ **Support your lower back:** Your lower back bears most of the strain when you are seated and needs constant support. Adjust the back support on your chair to fit the hollow of your lower back. If necessary, use a pillow designed to support the lower curve in your back.
- ☞ **Sit to suit your activity:** An upright sitting posture may be most comfortable for typing or computer use. Forward sitting postures are common for writing and reaching. Reclined sitting postures are often used for reading or conversations. Use good posture: try to keep your ears, shoulders, and hips in a straight line.
- ☞ **Tilt your seat:** Sitting with your knees slightly lower than your hips reduces the strain on your lower back, when doing forward work like writing or drafting. Try adjusting the seat of your chair so that it is tilted slightly forward. If necessary, use a seat wedge (triangular seat pillow).
- ☞ **Move in close:** You can avoid slouching and awkward postures by moving your chair as close to your work as is comfortably possible. Avoid armrests on chairs that prevent you from sliding your chair up close to your desk.
- ☞ **Put your foot down:** Resting your feet on the floor provides support to your lower back. Adjust the height of your chair so that you can rest your feet on the floor or use a footrest, if necessary.

**HEALTHY WORK HABITS** and physical fitness can complement a well-designed work-space and chair.

- ☞ **Rotate job tasks:** Break up long hours sitting at your desk with other job tasks such as copying or filing when possible.
- ☞ **Take a break:** Take a one or two minute break at least every hour or as needed for a brief walk around the office. Try some simple stretching exercises to release the muscle tension caused by sitting.
- ☞ **Stay fit:** Sedentary work requires fitness for stamina, circulation, and stress reduction. Find an exercise activity you can enjoy and can fit into your schedule three times a week.

# Back Savers in the Office ▽

## OFFICE FILES

- ☞ Store the files you use most often in file drawers that are at waist height.
- ☞ Avoid using your file cabinet or lower desk drawers from a seated position to prevent twisting and bending over at your back. It is better to get out of your chair and lower yourself by using your leg.
- ☞ Don't bend over to use lower file drawers. Go down on one knee to save your back.
- ☞ Use a stool for filing tasks in upper file drawers.

## STANDING TASKS

If your job involves standing long hours at a customer service window or over a copying machine, try these back-saving tips:

- ☞ Adjust the height of your work surface so that you can stand up straight and work without stretching or twisting.
- ☞ Rest one foot on a low footstool (about 4 inches in height) to keep your spine in balance. Alternate legs to relieve strain.
- ☞ Use a mat on hard floors and wear low-heeled, supportive shoes with adequate cushion.
- ☞ Use a tall chair with a built-in bar for the feet to provide an alternative work position for tasks on a high surface.

## LIFTING BASICS

Think first and get help, if needed, before lifting anything. Ask yourself:

- Can I lift it alone?
  - Should I ask a co-worker for help?
  - Do I need mechanical help, such as a cart or dolly?
- ☞ **Hug the load.** Before you lift, bring the load as close to your body as possible and hold it close while you are lifting or lowering the load.
  - ☞ **Lift with your legs.** Keep your back straight and lift by bending and straightening your legs. This helps you keep your center of balance and use your leg muscles to lift.
  - ☞ **Avoid twisting.** Make sure your feet, knees, and body are pointed in the same direction when you are lifting. Twisting can overload your spine and lead to serious injury.
  - ☞ **Avoid overhead lifts.** Use a stepstool or ladder to lift objects stored above shoulder height.

# Campus Resources ▽

- ☞ **Back Talk** workshop, check ICE or call Health\*Matters at 643-4646.
- ☞ **Smooth Moves** Workshop, call Mallory Lynch, Ergonomics Specialist at 643-2540
- ☞ Medical care for work-related back problems, make an appointment with the Occupational Health Clinic at 642-6891.
- ☞ Workstation furniture/accessories, call 1-877-722-9090 (toll free) to schedule an appointment at the Campus Ergonomics Showroom.
- ☞ Fitness and Exercise Programs:
  - Health\*Matters Walking Group meets every MWF at 12:10 at the Campanile.
  - Step It Up! pedometer, strength, and flexibility program. To enroll, see ICE.
  - Cal FIT fitness and exercise class information, call 643-5151.
- ☞ Information on the Web:
  - Fitness & exercise: <http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu/Facstaff/HealthMatters>
  - Stretching programs: <http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu/Facstaff/Ergonomics/Stretch.htm>



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