How to Reduce Your Risk of Ergonomic Injuries



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Safety Talk

What's at Stake?

One size does not fit all when it comes to work equipment. Whenever a worker must modify or adjust herself to perform a work task, the mismatch between the worker and the task causes stress and strain on her body.

If the task needs to be performed only occasionally, it doesn't typically become a problem. But the strain of performing a task repetitively during one shift or over a period of days, weeks, months and sometimes years can cause chronic ergonomic-related injuries and illnesses that become serious, requiring time off work or surgery.

What's the Danger?

• Muscle strains and tears • Joint or tendon inflammation • Pinched nerves • Carpal tunnel syndrome • Trigger finger • Tendonitis	• Rotator cuff syndrome • Hand-arm vibration syndrome • Low back pain • Herniated spinal disk • Sciatica

How to Protect Yourself

To reduce your risk of incurring an ergonomic-related injury, it’s important to ensure the work task fits you, not the other way around. Here are some ways you can do that:

Adjust your workstation: Consider raising or lowering a chair, changing the level of your work bench or obtaining a platform to stand on. Adjusting the angle of a drafting board or repositioning a computer screen can greatly improve comfort and performance. You can also rearrange lighting to see your work without having to lean forward.

Adapt your tools: Adding longer, padded or angled handles to tools can lessen repetitive strain. Use tools designed to keep your hands, arms and back in a comfortable, natural position while you are working. And avoid handles that cut into the hand.

Arrange your work: Place work materials where you can reach them without excessive stretching, twisting or bending. Avoid arrangements where you must lean forward and reach at an angle. Store materials on a shelf rather than on the floor to minimize lifting.

Take a break: Organize your work to allow you to switch from one task to another. This will help avoid back strain and repetitive strain. Take advantage of scheduled breaks to stretch and move around.

Be aware: Pay attention to how you feel while you’re working. Adjust your work area to prevent muscle strain.

Know the signs: Symptoms of ergonomic-related injuries often begin as minor complaints of discomfort, stiffness or aches that disappear when you go home at the end of your shift. However, if you continue to perform the same task the same way, the body’s ability to recover decreases and eventually the discomfort turns into a more serious condition. That’s why it’s important to recognize the early symptoms of a problem and alert your supervisor before a more serious injury occurs. Some of these symptoms can be:

- Painful joints
- Pain, tingling or numbness in hands or feet
- Pain in the wrists, shoulders, forearms or knees
- Back or neck pain
- Swelling or inflammation
- Shooting or stabbing pains in the arms or legs
- Fingers or toes turning white

Final Word

Nobody knows your job like you do, so speak up if you have an idea on how your work or workstation could be made better from an ergonomic point of view.