



Reasons to Address Workplace Pain

When work is a pain, do something about it immediately.

Especially if your wrists or arms, neck and shoulders or back hurt. Those are the most common areas in which workers have pain and stress, say ergonomics experts.

"Anytime you're feeling pain in a joint or a muscle in a work situation, you need to say something that first day," said Jana Kray, a physical therapist and ergonomic consultant with Iowa Health Physical Therapy Clinic, 6001 Westown Parkway in West Des Moines. "If it persists for three days, you definitely need to say something."

Most people will experience some work-related pain in their lifetime. The key is to keep the situation from becoming chronic, said Kray.

Cheri Stone, a reliability analyst for John Deere Intelligent Solutions Group, knows that all too well. She went through two carpal tunnel surgeries about 25 years ago when she was a hairdresser.

"I had pain, but I didn't really do anything about it or think about it, or know about it then. I've heard that today they try to train you differently, but there was no talk of it back in the day," said Stone of Johnston. Now, she works at a computer all day and whenever she notices a tingling in the tip of her pointer finger, she takes immediate action.



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"I start wearing the wrist guards when I work and when I sleep," said Stone, who also may use ice and take ibuprofen. Her employer has helped her with a special chair and modifications to her work station.

Large employers, especially, have resources to help employees.

"If we can catch it early, we can get them taken care of within a week or two. If not, this can go on for years," said nurse Katherine Reardon, manager of corporate health at Meredith Publishing Company in Des Moines.

Kray and Reardon said work-related pain generally can be treated successfully in two to three weeks with physical modifications, temporary use of anti-inflammatory medicines, icing and sometimes physical therapy. But when workplace pain is not addressed within three weeks, it can become chronic and more complicated to treat.

Kray added that treating the acute injury is only part of the solution. Both employees who have desk jobs and those who do physical labor need to incorporate healthy behaviors both into their work day and in addition to their work hours.

Kray, who consults for several Des Moines area employers, said she talks to hurting employees about two things. First, what is causing the pain in their workplace and how to avoid that pain. Second, she asks them about their physical fitness or exercise routine outside of work.

The underlying problem for many desk workers is weakened core muscles. The muscles in the abdomen and back are not strong enough to support the body sitting in the same position for eight hours, she said. Although the desk worker may not experience pain, Kray said they often feel exhausted at the end of the day from the subtle isometric effort of holding their bodies in the same upright sitting position for hours at a time.

"We really try to push the physical exercise," said Kray.

5 Tips to Avoid Pain

Check the position of your keyboard. Seventy-five percent of workers who complain of wrist, neck and shoulder pain have their keyboard too far from their bodies, said Kray. The keyboard should be close enough that the worker can type while sitting up straight, their elbows at the sides of their body and their forearms almost parallel to the ground.

Stand up or walk around every 30 to 45 minutes. "Go talk to someone instead of e-mailing them. Walk to the printer to get your copies," said Kray. Stand up while you're making a phone call.

Practice proper posture. If you stand for long periods at work, occasionally rest one foot on a stool or small box. If you sit, make sure your chair allows you to rest both feet flat on the floor. If necessary rest your feet on a small stool or box so your knees are level with your hips. If your chair doesn't support your lower back, place a rolled towel or small pillow in the curve of your lower back.

Address stress. Stress can increase muscle tension and make you more prone to injury. Develop an array of healthy coping mechanisms to use when you feel yourself getting stressed: Take a walk around the block, sit quietly and breathe deeply for 60 seconds or talk briefly about your frustrations with a trusted friend.

Be fit for work. Maintain a healthy weight to reduce back pain. Combine 75 to 150 minutes a week of aerobic activity - walking, swimming, or biking - with at least two strength-training sessions a week. Especially helpful are exercises such as Pilates and yoga that strengthen and stretch your back and abdominal muscles.

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