

LiveWell *@work* with Iowa Methodist Occupational Medicine

A Mouse Tried to Kill Me... Are You Next?

A personal story about the warning signs of poor ergonomics

Today I had the good fortune of inheriting some unwanted office furniture from another department within our company. As a former teacher, I long ago learned the value of free stuff and have previously perfected the fine art of scrounging. Turns out it's pretty handy in a hospital, too.

After the chair was delivered, I knew immediately that it couldn't stay. Quality-wise, it was nice enough and very well kept. But as far as office chairs go, this one was lacking a certain necessary feature that in my profession I've realized is vital: It was not adjustable. The seat height hovered steadfast at about 14 inches from the floor.

Now, at 6 foot nothing, I can manage some pretty small chair heights and remain relatively comfortable at that. But before I settled into this new chair to get to work, my unsuspecting mind miraculously accessed the faint memory of a past experience of a similar chair in a similar office (in a galaxy far, far away, perhaps). Let's just say it was painful to recall, but un-burying that little gem of wisdom is probably extending my healthy years as we speak.

The Ugly Past

When I first began work at Iowa Health, I chose a comfy, swivelly, roly desk chair and dug right in. At the time, I was new to occupational medicine, and I'd certainly never heard about ergonomic analysis. My chair sat very low to the floor, and I actually had to reach upward to my desk and keyboard. And since 90% of my desk work is on the computer, that ended up equating to quite a bit of time with my arms and hands in a considerably awkward position.

At first, I didn't think about it. I didn't have any trouble. I was getting my work done just fine, and I certainly didn't have anything to complain about. But then I began to notice a bit of that nagging ache and pain that I just couldn't attribute to old age. Sure, my young sons inflict their fair share of dad-damage during football games and the like, but that couldn't be it, either. It was like water seeping through concrete, but eventually my dense and unsuspecting brain figured it out. My mouse hand ached, twinged, and even plain hurt a lot of the time, especially at the end of the day or the end of the work week. All that computer work was taking a toll that I never thought possible. After all, carpal tunnel is just a myth, right?

My Left-Right Job at Mouse-Death

Brilliantly, I had discovered what experts in my profession have been preaching forever: Ergonomics are important. Go figure! My mouse hand was slowly curling up into the arthritic equivalent of a Tyrannosaurus Rex forearm (fossilized, of course – dinosaurs are "eh-stink", as my four-year-old puts it). I realized I needed to make some changes, or this pain and loss of function could really get out of hand. Pun intended. And so, for the first time since I learned how to cut steak with my left hand, I became ambidextrous. One morning, I boldly lifted my ergonomic mouse pad from the right side of the keyboard and plunked it proudly down on the left.

Then, for the next 8 hours, I inadvertently sent partially completed emails, deleted irreplaceable files, and swore more than the average office worker should in a given day – all for the sake of ergonomics. Needless to say, it took awhile to get the hang of the left-hand operated mouse. Especially those left and right click buttons. Whoa, did that ever get me in trouble a few times. But after a few days, it became surprisingly easy to manipulate the mouse with my left hand. And after a week, lo and behold, my right hand no longer hurt. The pain I was inflicting through poor posture and bad ergonomics had completely disappeared. Turns out, folks in our field knew this would happen. I guess I missed that bit at orientation...

My next move was to get rid of the low-rider, even though all my friends know him (shout out to War there). I was so certain that the chair and my subsequent poor body mechanics had caused my problems that I immediately began using a standard, stationary chair from another part of our office. It didn't swivel. It didn't have rollers. And the fabric pattern was nowhere near as cool as the low-rider. But it was the proper height, allowing my feet to rest flat and firm on the floor while my arms bent at slightly more than 90 degrees to address my keyboard and mouse. It was heaven!

Along with a higher chair (my boss gladly got me a brand new, fully adjustable desk chair when I finally asked) and my ambidextrous mouse use, I made a goal to switch my mouse hand regularly and to implement a stretching regimen at least twice a day. Best practice would have been to stretch a bit every hour, but I tend to lose track of time when I work, so a couple times a day seemed like a reasonably attainable goal. I took a few of the stretches from the St. Luke's WorkSmart Stretching Plan (see link below – I like numbers 8, 9, and 10 the best) and did them as often as I could. I switch mouse hands every month or two. My desk is the proper height. And my hands don't hurt any more.

Is Your Mouse a Murderer?

So, back to today. I rolled the new low-riding chair to the corner and plan to have it removed as soon as possible. Even though I knew I wouldn't be using it, I don't think anyone else visiting my office should be subjected to the potential problems of an ergonomically dysfunctional chair.

I imagine many of you, if able to make it this far through my rambling article, are reading this from the comfort (or discomfort) of your desk chair. Take a minute to assess your own ergonomics. Is your posture correct? Are your feet flat on the floor or a raised stool? How far do you bend your arms or wrists to type on your keyboard? If you reach for your mouse, does it bare its gnarly fangs and remind you that extended mouse use leaves your hands, wrists, or arms in a spasmed state of pain and aching? Luckily, all of these problems can be fixed with relative ease.

If you have experienced any forearm, hand, or wrist pain that seems to be aggravated by work, consider taking a hard look at your desk set-up, including that scary mouse. A few very simple changes could have you pain free in no time and could save you the trouble of any long-term, cumulative damage. But at least if that happens, you might finally be able to get your employer to spring for that iPad. No mouse required.

Author:

Steve Krob, Iowa Methodist Occupational Health & Wellness, (515) 241-2223, krobsb@ihs.org

WorkSmart Stretching Plan: <http://www.iowahealth.org/filesimages/Services/OccupationalHealth/Newsletter/WorkSmartStretch.pdf>