

THE ERGONOMINCALLY HEALTHY WORKSTATION

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FOR FAMILY HANDYMAN

HEAD:

Creating the Ergonomic Workstation

SUBHEAD:

Design your office with your body in mind.

DEK:

Computer users increasingly see their machines less as friends than as threats to their health. Career-threatening repetitive stress injuries, damaged vision, and a host of other ailments can be prevented.

CALLOUTS:

Start with the right height chair.

Then adjust the rest of the office -- keyboard, desk, monitor -- to you. You should be able to put your feet on the floor, with your knees pointing slightly up. With chairs, big is not always best, and the chair needn't be adjustable. It should let you put your wrists at keyboard level, with your forearm at a right angle to your upper arm. The chair should support your lower back.

Tip for shorter people. *Raise the chair to put the wrists at keyboard level. Then use a foot rest to anchor the feet.*

A clear, stable, readable image.

You need a good quality monitor, one with a low dot pitch of .26 or less. Only you can decide what's best for your eyes -- see the monitor in action before you buy. For better contrast and resolution, faster response, and smaller footprint. Consider grayscale over color VGA. Bright color is harder on the eyes than subdued color -- make sure the monitor dials allows lots of adjustability.

Don't sit too close.

Sit as far from the monitor as you can and still work comfortably. Some businesses embed monitors in counters, so users must look down -- this can be hard on many people's spines.

Tip. *Computer screens attract dust magnetically. Clean your screen every few days.*

What about radiation?

While users are concerned screen emissions, the jury is still out on whether they do harm. If radiation concerns you, investigate TCO monitors like those from Nanao, costing \$1600-\$2000, or less costly radiation filters that can be fit onto your current monitor.

Tip: *Most radiation exits from the back of your monitor. Back-to-back PCs increase radiation risk.*

A well-lit room.

Glare from room light and sunlight can be annoying and exhausting. Glare filters are available for \$30 or less, but they can also cut image clarity. Lighting should come from the sides or above, not from in front or behind. Use window shades. Several soft light sources beat a single bright beam.

Use a computer desk.

The biggest mistake people make is putting PC and keyboard atop a regular desk, forcing the user's hands and eyes higher than they should be. The goal is a desk that keeps your wrists low and your monitor at eye level.

Keep wrists relaxed and straight.

To prevent stress injury, keep your wrists straight. Check out the inexpensive (\$10 and up) wrist rests and wrist supports. But don't press against them -- pressing against a rest will exacerbate stress.

Keyboards should permit relaxed typing.

Piano teachers tell us how to hold our hands -- but no one tells us how to type safely. Choose a keyboard that puts the hands in a natural position and does not require jabbing or squeezing.

Let the mouse roam free.

Mouse design is less important than room to roam. Give your mouse lots of rolling space, so you are not bumping up against things. Keep it beside the keyboard, not above it.

Maintain good habits.

Remember the basic posture: feet flat on the floor, knees slightly up, back supported, elbows at right angles and wrists straight. Give yourself frequent breaks to get up and walk around. Keep moving, stretching, though the work day to alleviate tension and improve circulation. Exercise can help protect the most important apparatus equipment in your office -- your bod. ❖

SIDEBAR:

Answers interviewed:

- Philip Jacobs, ergonomics and safety consultant, St. Paul, 651-699-7938
- Mike Finley, technology columnist, Knight Ridder newspapers, 612-644-4540