

PhysioBiz

Health newsflashes

for bodies busy moving, working, playing, being.



When work is a pain in the neck

Welcome to PhysioBiz, with healthcare advice and information you can trust and rely on, brought to you by the South African Society of Physiotherapy!

Do you come home from work with a headache, stiff neck and aching shoulders?

Workplaces are not designed for healthy, happy bodies. Whether you're sitting in front of a screen all day, stacking boxes or scanning items at a till, your body is asked to do many things for long periods of time or repeatedly, that aren't great for physical comfort.

“There's a lot you can do about it, though,” says Marisa Coetzee, chair of the Occupational Health Special Interest Group at the South African Society of Physiotherapy. As a physiotherapist with a special interest in occupational health, she is called in to help assess workplaces and suggest possible changes – from the height of a desk to the level of shelving – which can make a huge difference in the comfort at work and even prevention of injury. Physiotherapists who focus on occupational health are able to help working people take preventative action, treat people who are already suffering from pain or discomfort in the workplace, and if the worst happens, and someone is seriously injured, they can help them get back to optimum function through a carefully designed rehabilitation and return to work programme.

“People can do things to help themselves avoid work-related pain, too,” says Coetzee. “For example, we know that sitting for too long on the job is bad for you – you'll have seen headlines claiming that ‘sitting is the new smoking’, and research published last year showed that a sedentary lifestyle seems to speed aging. But recent research indicates that regular aerobic exercise can provide protection against the cardiovascular impact of sedentary work.”

For those already in pain, there's plenty of evidence that exercise will help reduce the pain.

Some other things you could do to avoid work-related pain:

Avoid repetitive movements and sustaining positions for extended periods

Don't do the same thing in the same way over and over for an hour or more – vary the way you move. Don't sit or stand in one position for longer than one hour, but rather pause to do a few exercises every hour.

Take breaks

Get up and move around regularly, even if it's just to stand up and stretch. Or use the bathroom furthest away from your office.

Have active meetings

Spend the group discussion time in your meetings standing or walking outside.

Stretch neck muscles

For screen-facing workers, or those who drive a lot, the neck muscles take a pounding. Try these stretches several times a day:

- Sit up in a comfortably straight posture (relaxed but upright) and pull your chin back so that your head is positioned in line with your body.
 - Now drop your chin towards your chest. Feel the stretch in the back of the neck? Hold for a few seconds, raise, and repeat five times.
 - Roll your shoulders backwards in a circle a few times
 - Drop your head to one side, as if you're trying to make your ear touch your shoulder. Hold and repeat five times, then do the same thing on the other side.

Get enough sleep

People with low back pain have a significantly poorer quality of sleep than those without, and this can impact on your experience in the workplace in many ways. Chat to a physiotherapist about how to improve your sleep patterns.

To find a physiotherapist with a special interest in occupational health, go to www.saphysio.co.za.