

# PhysioBiz

*Health newsflashes*

*for bodies busy moving, working, playing, being.*



## **Banish the work-related aches and pains!**

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

Let's look at how we can improve your health on the job.

Think back to our ancestors – hunter-gatherers, farmers and peasants. None of them sat in front of a desk or behind the wheel of a car all day. As a result, they were unlikely to suffer from the kind of neck and shoulder pain we do. The headache behind the eyes, in the temples, the ache in the corner of the jaw – all common phenomena for today's screen-bound workers.

We sit over a screen for eight hours a day at least at work – and then go home and hunch over a smart phone or tablet.

The result? One of the commonest causes of days off work and debilitation is back pain and neck pain.

If you have burning pain in your shoulders, in the base of your neck and up into the lower part of the skull, or a burning feeling between your shoulder blades, chances are your trapezius muscles are overworking from an unnatural working life of repetitive movements and repetitive strain. (The trapezius muscles are long kite-shaped muscles, left and right, that lie between the spine, the shoulder and the head.) The muscles in the neck, which hold up our heads, can also be affected.

Physiotherapists who work in the field of ergonomics (an applied science concerned with designing or arranging things so as to create an effective and safe workplace) have some suggestions for you:

- Check the position of your laptop or computer screen.

Your eyes should focus on the screen at a point 15 degrees below the horizontal – in other words, you should be looking very slightly downwards.

Is the computer positioned directly in front of you? Angling it even slightly off to one side or the other can cause strain on one side of the neck.

Make sure it is at a comfortable distance – at least an arm's length away – so you can see the whole screen easily and don't have to twist or move your head around.

Is there any glare on your screen or monitor? That causes strain.

- Forearms should be supported to ease strain placed on shoulders
- Don't hold your phone between your shoulder and ear.

This causes intense strain on the muscles. Get a headset if you need to work while talking, or use a hands-free phone.

- Posture counts.

Do you thrust your head or your chin forward as you work? This can cause muscle strain and pain.

It takes time to change the habit. Imagine you are suspended from a balloon, with the string attached to the crown of your head. Your chin would naturally tuck in a little, and the curve in the back of your neck would straighten. That's a good and comfortable posture – stop every now and then and consciously get into this position, until it becomes a habit.

- Move while you're working

Give your body a break – move around every twenty minutes; pause to do your stretches or get up and walk around. Visit a colleague instead of phoning for info, grab a cup of coffee, or just walk the length of the office and back.

- Move when you're not working

Try to avoid falling into the same positions and posture as you adopt at work when you're not working – don't hunch over screens during your leisure hours!

### Stretch

Some simple stretches can help relive trapezius stiffness:

Drop your head forward so your chin is moving towards your chest and you feel a pull behind your neck. Hold for a count of ten, release, and repeat.

Tilt your head sideways as though you're trying to touch your shoulder with your ear. Hold for a count of ten, release, and repeat tilting towards the other shoulder.

Turn your head so that you are pointing your chin towards your shoulder; press your chin down towards the shoulder, hold for a count of ten, release, and repeat again in the opposite direction.

Grab a tennis ball and head for the nearest wall. Place the ball between the wall and your trapezius muscles on either side of the spine and roll it up and down. When you find a spot that's aching, press gently there for about a minute, until it feels released. Repeat on the other side.

Finally, get up and move around! Try never to sit in one place for more than twenty minutes.

### CONTACT:

To find a physiotherapist close to you who can advise and provide you with a tailor-made programme of exercise, contact:

The South African Society of Physiotherapy

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