

Staying healthy at your desk

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The health risks associated with office work have been well documented in recent years.

Despite this, the average adult still continues to spend 50-70% of their time sitting in front of a computer, sometimes with minimal time away from their screens - and until last year, I was no exception.

Plagued with persistent headaches, I booked an appointment with the doctor. Her diagnosis - spending too many hours a day in front of a computer screen had given me eyestrain.

Fortunately, she explained that the majority of office-related eyesight complaints are temporary, and I could avoid future headaches by taking care of my eyes at work. She suggested that I follow the 20-20-20 rule - every 20 minutes, look away from your screen for 20 seconds, at something that is at least 20ft (7m) away.

Although I was relieved that my headaches didn't have a more sinister cause, I began researching other medical problems associated with desk work - and I was shocked by my findings.

First, I wasn't alone in experiencing eyestrain - different studies have found that between 50 and 90% of people who work with computers experience problems with their eyes. Along with following the advice of my doctor, studies suggested that office workers should:

- Keep the computer monitor at least 500mm from the eyes, and ensure that it sits at eye level
- Avoid having glare from overhead lights or bright sunshine reflect onto the screen
- Match the screen brightness to light levels in the room
- Wear glasses rather than contact lenses, to avoid uncomfortably dry eyes.

Along with eyesight, studies have raised concerns about posture at the desk, and the length of time spent sitting down in general. I discovered that my regular visits to the gym would not compensate for spending hours and hours sitting at a desk.

A study by the University of Sydney found that 'prolonged sitting has been shown to disrupt metabolic function', even if you achieve the recommended amount of exercise a week. I needed to change my daily routine, and put far more thought into the way I worked.

1. Length of time spent sitting

Research suggests that it's important to reduce the amount of time spent sitting down. Although difficult, there are a number of ways for office workers to do this:

- Change your commute. If you usually drive to work, park further away from the office and walk the remaining distance. If you take public transport, choose to stand rather than sit, and get off before your usual stop.
- Walk at lunch. Rather than sitting at your desk or in the canteen to eat lunch, try to spend your entire lunch break on your feet.
- Take standing breaks. Aim to get up from your desk at least once an hour, even if it's just for a walk down the corridor.

Health professionals recommend taking 10,000 steps a day. I bought a pedometer, and discovered that my usual bus commute saw me taking around 4,000 steps each day. After experimenting with different bus stops and routes, I've roughly doubled my daily walking distance.

2. Posture

We can reduce the amount of time we spend sitting at a desk, but we can't eliminate it entirely. It's important to maintain good posture when sitting down - failing to do so can lead to a range of health problems.

To prevent unnecessary strain on your muscles and joints, it's recommended to follow these tips:

- Your forearms should be parallel to the floor, with your elbows resting at the side of your body - adjust your chair height until this is the case.
- Your feet should sit flat on the floor or a footrest, and your hips should only be slightly higher than your knees.
- Don't cross your legs, as this can disrupt your circulation.
- Invest in an ergonomic chair, which will help provide lumbar support - responsible employers should provide these for staff.

Try to introduce small, healthy habits into your daily routine - your body will thank you in the future!

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