

**“OH, MY ACHING BACK...NECK...OR WRIST!”**  
**Tips for Preventing Workplace-related Injuries**  
by  
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How many times have you heard the expression, “Oh, my aching back!” With some 70% of Americans reporting at least one episode of severe back or neck pain in their lives, it’s a fair bet that you or one of your colleagues has experienced such a problem.

As an event planner, you may have already surmised that one of the major causes of injuries is the nature of the job itself – lots of telephone calling, sitting at the desk, and working on the computer for hours on end. These work patterns can result in repetitive stress injuries – trouble that occurs when your back, neck or arms are held in an unnatural position for an extended period of time. Examples of this type of injury are tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome and neck and back strain that arise without a particular inciting event. You may also face many hours on your feet while on-site at a conference or trade show, and may need to lift or carry heavy packages as part of the job.

The best way to prevent these injuries is by paying attention to ergonomics – the way we hold our body and use energy while we are working.

Let’s start with a quick anatomy lesson. Your spinal column consists of a series of cylindrical bones stacked one on top of another and held together with ligaments, muscles and discs. The spine holds the upper body together and protects the nerves going to the arms and the legs. Normally, the spine is held upright, while the cervical (neck) and lumbar (low back) spines are curved forward and the thoracic spine (mid-back) is curved backward. The trouble begins when trauma or chronic positional forces disrupt this normal arrangement.

Here are some tips to help you work in a more ergonomically correct way:

- Choose the right chair. Your chair should have a lower back support. Adjust the height so that your feet touch the ground. The chair should also be stable and move easily.
- Set up your computer work station properly. Start by adjusting your chair so that you are sitting comfortably. Position your computer screen directly in front of your eyes, so that you are looking straight ahead to see the screen – not up, down, or to the side. Be sure to arrange the lighting so that glare isn’t a problem.

Set the height of your keyboard at about waist level or a little above to prevent stress on your arms and wrists. Working with your wrists positioned straight or raised slightly up is best – bending your wrists downward to reach the keys narrows the space in the carpal tunnel and can lead to problems. Your computer mouse should be kept similarly accessible. A gel wrist support can be useful. And remember to take breaks and stretch. Any position held for too long can cause discomfort.

- Take stretch breaks. If you spend many hours a day using a computer or sitting at a desk, be sure to take regular breaks. Stretch, rotate your shoulders, arch your back, and gently rotate your head and neck through a full range of motion. Tighten and loosen your leg muscles frequently, especially your calf muscles. This will help to prevent cramps and circulatory problems.
- Invest in a headset. If you spend a lot of time on the phone, consider using a good quality headset. This allows you to move your head, neck, and shoulders freely. As an added benefit, it frees up your hands so you can talk more expressively and with more animation, which reflects in your voice.
- Stand tall and wear good shoes. If you have to stand for long periods at a time at a trade show or event, be sure to wear good soft shock absorbing footwear. An extra shock absorbing layer under your feet like a foam mat can really help a lot. When you are standing, take time to bend to the left, right, and forward to stretch your muscles. Also tighten and loosen your leg muscles regularly.
- Lift packages safely. It's hard to avoid lifting, especially at events, but there are some things you can do to minimize risk of injury. Remember to keep the weight as close to your body as possible. Ideally, lifting should be done at about the waist level without twisting your trunk, reaching too far forward or to the sides. When lifting objects from the floor, the safest position is with your head up and looking forward – not down or to the side. Repeated lifting above the shoulders should be avoided. You can also use a brace, such as a lumbar support, to help maintain proper body mechanics.

While nothing can prevent all workplace related injuries, these tips will help minimize the risk and keep you in good shape to meet the challenges of your job. And remember that there are a host of medical professionals – orthopedic surgeons, physiatrists (doctors of physical medicine), occupational physicians, and physical and occupational therapists – ready and willing to play a role in the evaluation and decision-making process should problems arise.

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*Principals of New England Orthopedic Specialists in Peabody, Massachusetts, Doctors Halsted and Lovejoy are both Board Certified in Orthopedic Surgery. Dr. Halsted also has a certificate of added qualification in hand surgery. He has been active developing new instrumentation and surgical techniques for use in hand surgery. Dr. Lovejoy has been a member of the New England Orthopedic Specialists team since 1981. In addition to a full practice schedule, his academic appointments include Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital as well as many other hospital staff appointments. To reach them or to learn more about orthopedic care and the latest treatment options, contact New England Orthopedic Specialists at 978-531-0800.*