The Dangerous Desk

Mouse-clicking isn’t heavy lifting, but it can cause injury. How to keep your job from immobilizing you (Newsweek, March 26, 2001) By Karen Sringen

Howard Egerman often feels as though a nail is piercing his hand. He sleeps fitfully at night. He struggles with such simple tasks as changing a light bulb. Egerman, 54, suffers from bilateral carpal tunnel syndrome.

He developed the ailment after years of sitting at a keyboard—processing disability claims for the Social Security Administration. He’s still on the job, thanks to surgery and a specially designed workstation. But this condition can affect much more than a person’s work life. Among the upcoming topics for discussion at Egerman’s repetitive-strain injury support group: “sex with no hands.”

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Who would have thought that sitting in a cubicle could do so much damage? True, you’re more likely to kill yourself operating heavy machinery. But a million U.S. workers lose days to repetitive-motion injuries every year, says Dr. Jeremiah Barondess, who chaired a National Academy of Sciences panel on the problem. Congress recently scotched the comprehensive ergonomics rules adopted by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration under President Bill Clinton. Opponents deemed the costly regulations unfair to employers, since none of the disabilities plaguing desk workers is caused exclusively by office work. “The problem exists whether the [rules] exist or not,” says David Wegman, a work-environment expert at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. With a little effort you can keep your job from wrecking your muscles, joints and tendons. Here are some tips for surviving the cubicle.

For your eyes: People who spend as little as two hours a day in front of a monitor can suffer from “computer vision syndrome,” a cluster of symptoms that includes eyestrain, blurred vision, headaches and dry, irritated eyes. Our eyes are designed for looking at sharp, clear images, says Sacramento, Calif., optometrist Brian Tracy, not for staring at fuzzy-edged words on an illuminated background. An eye doctor can tell you if you might benefit from glasses designed for computer users. These prescription lenses are made specifically to sharpen type at the arm’s-length distance of a monitor. If your eyes are simply dry, try redirecting your overhead air vents and using drops that lubricate the eyes without constricting blood vessels to reduce red-ness. James Sheedy of the Computer Eye Clinic at the University of California, Berkeley, also suggests using blinds and dimming the room lights to reduce screen glare. A visor or an antireflection shield—even a file folder taped to the top and sides of your monitor—can also help. Avoid garish screen colors; black type on a white background is easiest on the eyes. And make sure your typeface is large enough for you to read without leaning forward.

For your neck: Place your monitor straight in front of you so you don’t need to turn your head to see it. And keep your screen low enough that you don’t have to flex your neck to look at it. That’s especially important for bifocal wearers, who tend to raise their chins for a down-the-nose
view of the screen. When you use a laptop, elevate it slightly so that you’re not hunching down to see the screen. And when talking on the phone, don’t cradle it between your head and shoulder—an invitation to neck strain or even a pinched nerve. Use a headset.

For your back: Consider buying a computer table with an adjustable-tilt tray for your keyboard. And don’t place your monitor more than 26 inches from your face. No chair is comfortable when you have to sit in it all day, but you can reduce the load on your spine by keeping your thighs away from your torso (parallel to the floor). No chair is perfect for everyone. But the German-designed Swopper seat—a $575 backless stool on a steel spring that allows both vertical and horizontal motion—may help prevent postural problems by forcing you to support your own weight. It can be purchased through the online store of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. But before you invest, check the features on your current equipment. You might find that your chair has unused height and tension levers.

For your arms and hands: Typing and clicking may not involve much exertion, but if your hands are in the wrong position, mere finger work can tax muscles, tendons and nerves. Ideally, your wrist and hand should extend straight from your elbow, parallel to the floor. Lin Beribak, a certified hand therapist at the Chicago Center for Surgery of the Hand, suggests tilting the keyboard away from you so that the space bar is higher than the letters. Keyboards that separate the right and left hands are more accommodating than traditional ones, which force the wrists into an unnatural position. Goldtouch, a maker of ergonomic computer peripherals, sells a keyboard that users can adjust by as much as 30 degrees, so that the palms ease toward each other instead of facing the floor.

For the rest of your body: Even when you do everything right, sitting at a desk is not a particularly healthful pastime. “Office work is a challenge,” says chiropractor David Lemberg, author of “Commitment to Fitness.” “The fitter you are in general, the less likely you are to develop an ergonomics issue.” So don’t spend your leisure time surfing the Web at home. Stay active when you’re not at your desk, and take frequent breaks when you are. Even a dash to the water cooler can fight fatigue, promote circulation and ease strained muscles. If you think you’re too busy for a stroll around the block, you’re surely too busy to nurse a chronic injury.

For your mind: If repetitive motion can cause chronic aches and pains, so can psychological distress. Most desk workers diagnosed with repetitive-stress injuries are plagued by stress or boredom, says Dr. Robert Szabo, an orthopedic surgeon at UC-Davis Health Systems. Workers under extreme pressure are less likely to attend to their posture, and may strike their keyboard harder and more frequently. So no matter how unreasonable the demands you’re trying to meet, remind yourself to take microbreaks. Before computers invaded the workplace, people took them without even realizing it. “You had to stop and throw the carriage and put a new piece of paper in,” says Wegman of the University of Massachusetts. Now it takes conscious effort to break your pace—and a lot of sheer will. Even if your eyes and limbs feel fine, now is the time to improve your work habits. Repetitive-motion injuries are “cumulative trauma disorders,” says ergonomist Rani Lueder, president of Humansics ErgoSystems in Encino, Calif. “You’re gradually developing these problems over time.” And as Howard Egerman has learned, they’re a lot harder to live with than they are to prevent.