



work doesn't have to be a four letter word – PAIN

BY STEPHANIE FORTE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY LEAH HEMBERTY

THERE'S AN EASY WAY TO START FEELING BETTER THROUGHOUT THE DAY – IT'S A SIMPLE MATTER OF TIME AND ATTENTION... AND STRETCHING, AND ERGONOMICS, AND POSTURE, AND...

Tomorrow morning, wake up and run 26 miles. Let's see how you feel. Chances are, unless you've been training for a marathon, you'll end up injured.

But, if you start a comprehensive endurance, weight and flexibility training program, stretch before and after every training run and eat a healthy diet while drinking plenty of water, you can run that marathon length without a muscle or tendon tear.

Preparing for your career works the same way. Most people don't jump right in, but instead will prepare by earning a degree, enrolling in continuing education programs and working long hours in hopes of advancement. Apart from professional athletes, most Americans won't train endurance, strength and flexibility for their job. But they should.

Each year, 1.8 million people experience repetitive stress injuries (RSI) related to their job, including conditions such as carpal tunnel syndrome, bursitis, epicondylitis (tennis elbow) and tendonitis. A result of repetitive motions that stress the joint and pull on the surrounding muscles and tendons, the area becomes inflamed and irritated. Typing, clicking a mouse, poor posture, stress, tightness in the muscles and the improper design of a computer workstation can trigger an RSI condition.

Many "at risk" professions are common in Las Vegas. So whether you're an executive, web designer, performer, construction worker, chef or cocktail waitress, you can avoid becoming a national statistic without taking an injury leave.

Physical therapist Keith Klevens, who's worked with Olympic team gymnasts and professional athletes like Tiger Woods, became interested in corporate health when he came to Las Vegas in 1973. "I saw everyone being treated, but no one spending time preventing injury and helping people." Working with a major airline in Las Vegas, he created a preventative program, educating entry-level to executive employees with tips on conditioning themselves for the physical demands of their job.

The result? Injuries dropped dramatically.

Klevens admits certain jobs can create pathology, but before you demand your boss hire a full-time staff PT, he says, "The individual has to be responsible." After 32 years as a physical therapist, he sees less people assuming responsibility for their health, despite reports that Americans are getting in better shape. "I see more and more that people are less prepared to do the work they are asked to do."

Understanding the warning signs of a potentially dangerous condition and taking action to prevent these injuries will help you avoid aches and pains that can cause long-term damage.

SIGNS

In his 14 years as a physical therapist, Jeff Deets of OrthoSport targets shoulder impingement syndrome and carpal tunnel as the two leading repetitive stress injuries in his Las Vegas clients. "If you experience pain that lasts longer than two weeks, have it checked out," he says. Be aware of these symptoms:

- Tingling sensations and numbness in the thumb and first two fingers (*can indicate carpal tunnel*)
- Generalized soreness around the deltoid and interior shoulder region,

further exacerbated by reaching overhead (*can signal a shoulder impingement*)

If the condition goes untreated for over three months (at which point it can be classified as chronic) it becomes more difficult to repair. If completely ignored, conditions such as carpal tunnel can result in permanent nerve damage while shoulder impingement can lead to surgery.

RSI SIGNS/SYMPTOMS

- Muscle spasms
- Pain and/or swelling in the upper back, neck, shoulders, arms, elbows and wrists
- Loss of feeling and strength in the hands, arms or wrists
- Loss of control or decreased coordination
- Cold Hands
- Fatigue
- Difficulty using hands or arms to perform everyday activities, such as opening jars and doors, buttoning clothes and shifting your car
- Pain that creates difficulty sleeping

TIPS FOR AVOIDING RSI

Body Mechanics

Klevens poses the question, "Do you need the best biomechanical chair to have good posture?" While many folks may think yes, Klevens gives a surprising, "No. You need to have good posture and you can sit on anything."

Poor posture and improper body mechanics while executing everyday





activities such as lifting, reaching, pushing, pulling, sitting and typing are culprits of the aches and pains many experience. There is no quick fix, but there is a solution. You must examine, evaluate and make adjustments to your body positioning while performing daily activities. This process will help you to zero in on the weakness that triggers pain.

For example, at 8 am, your posture may be perfect. But as the day wears on and you become tired, you start to slouch or drop your head forward. Deets explains, "Your head becomes heavier for your muscles to hold. The longer it levers on the muscles, the more force they [need] to hold it."

Take Five

Take a break. It sounds easy enough, but many employees shy away from regular breaks fearing they'll be looked upon as the company slacker. But, taking breaks can reduce pain and increase productivity. The U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) released a study that examined two groups of employees who were given equal workloads. Those who took four five-minute breaks spaced throughout the day had less upper body discomfort than workers who took two 15-minute breaks.

Even when you are working under deadline, avoid typing for periods longer than 30 minutes by taking a short break and dropping your arms to your side, getting up and stretching. Moving your body for just a few minutes will relieve stress from your tendons and give you a chance to breathe.

Ergonomics

Ergonomics is the study of the user's interaction with his/her workstation and how the workstation can be modified to fit their specific needs. So whether you work on a computer at the office or are simply addicted to e-mail, the set-up of your computer workstation is crucial to your health.

Chair

- Standing in front of your chair, the seat should measure just below your knees
- While seated, your feet should be flat on the floor and thighs supported on the seat
- Be sure bulky armrests do not prevent your chair from fitting beneath your desk
- Adjust the backrest height to support the small of the back and spine

Desk Set-up and Posture

- If your desk height is not adjustable, consider a footrest wide enough to support both feet
- Place the keyboard away from the edge of your desk, allowing your forearms adequate resting space when not typing. This alleviates further pressure on the wrists
- When sitting up straight, you should be looking at the top edge of the monitor
- Keep forearms parallel to the floor, with knees, hips and elbows at 90 degrees

Physical Conditioning

"You must be stronger than the demands of your job." –Physical Therapist Dave Steinberger

- Use light weights (one to 10 pounds) and exercise bands to stretch and strengthen the muscles that support your forearms, shoulders and back. Warming up for work means more than a pit stop at Starbucks
- Run, walk, hike or cycle. These activities will improve your overall fitness level; and you'll work longer without fatigue
- Aside from looking great at the beach, abdominal training (crunches) will not only get you a six-pack, but also provide support for your back

- Stretch your muscles; it helps to relieve the stress built up on a daily basis. Consider yoga or adding a basic stretching routine to your daily regimen
- Consult your physician first, especially if you are experiencing nagging aches and pains

WARMING UP FOR WORK: CASE STUDIES

JULIA, 26, HAIRSTYLIST

Complains of stiff and tired fingers and hands after using scissors, brushes and clips.

Hand Stretch

Begin with your hands flat on your desk, then push up with your thumb and fingers. Hold for just a few seconds. Complete sets of 10 before, during and after work.

OR

Open your palm and extend your fingers until you feel tension. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds and release by folding your finger forward.

BECCA, 31, ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

Complains of pain in her wrists and forearms from constant typing.

Wrist/Forearm Stretch

Extend your arm in front of you, palms open and fingers pointing up. Gently apply pressure on your fingers, pulling back, with the other hand. Hold for several seconds. Repeat with the opposite arm.

TOM, 45, GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Spends eight to 10 hours per day working on a computer. By the end of the week, he has a terrible stiff neck.

Neck Stretch

Sitting upright with good posture, reach over your head and grasp the opposite ear. Gently pull your head towards your shoulder and hold for 10 seconds. Repeat on the opposite side.

JASON, 36, WAITER

Complains his shoulders feel tired and sore after a long shift, despite alternating the trays on his right and left side.

Shoulder Stretch

With arms at your side, roll your shoulder back, making small circles in sets of 10. Repeat this motion, rolling your shoulders forward.

OR

Extend your arm across your body, gently applying pressure with the opposite hand to your bicep area. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat with the opposite arm. Do sets of five with each arm.

OR

Standing in a corner of the room with hands at shoulder level, lean forward until you feel a comfortable stretch. Hold for 10 seconds. lvm

