

# Deskercise

The technological revolution has made huge differences to our lives. We can work from home, access the world with a click of a mouse, organise a party in minutes or share a joke with 30 of our best mates.

On the flip side, it has meant that many of us spend increasingly large parts of our day sitting at our desks glued to our computer screens. Add that to the time we spend sitting and eating, relaxing in front of the telly and driving to and from work and you could be spending up to 80 per cent of the day on your bottom.

I suspect this doesn't correlate terribly well with our original design specifications. The human body has thick skin on the soles of the feet to cope with physical demands of weight bearing. We don't have that same thick skin on our bottoms, as I imagine the original specification for hunting and gathering did not include large amounts of time sitting on rocks contemplating the meaning of life.

Interestingly, though, it seems many of us may be genetically modifying our bottoms and developing extra padding there to cope with the demands of modern life.

So what can you do if you spend large amounts of your time sitting at a desk? Even the most motivated, well-intentioned person finds it difficult to take regular breaks and do exercises. So my approach is to change the office to create good habits and detail some simple stretches to use when you start to feel a little achy.

## Change the office

This list is not so much an ergonomic checklist as a simple habit checklist. Each of the strategies is designed to make you move in a way that takes the load off your back and neck without you having to think about it at a conscious level. Thus good posture becomes a habit rather than an extra chore.

### Move the printer

If possible, position your printer so you have to stand up to retrieve a document. This gets you off your bottom and onto your feet.

### Relax your mouse

There is actually quite an art to using a mouse well. For many of us who have entered the technological revolution a little late, the computer can sometimes be a little frustrating, so there may be a tendency to grip the mouse. This creates a build-up of tension in the forearm, which can get very achy over time.

Second, be aware of relaxing your shoulder on the "mouse arm". It's amazing how much tension can build in your trapezius (neck muscles) as you focus on the screen. So stop every once in a while and give your shoulder a gentle roll back and down and release the tension

### Adjust your screen

Make sure your screen is at a height where you can look directly ahead without bending your neck. A couple of phonebooks will usually work well if you need to raise the height.

### Lift the keyboard

It doesn't matter how well set up your workstation is, if you can't touch type, you will constantly look down to check your keys. The best advice is to do an online touch-typing course. Otherwise, try lifting the back of your keyboard slightly so you don't have to bend your neck so far.

### **Lift your documents**

One of the biggest issues is that people sit documents on the return desk and consequently spend much of their day with their neck turned in one direction. Try attaching your papers to a simple vertical document holder. Keep it on your desk close to your screen rather than on the return.

### **Keep our elbows off the desk**

When you prop on your elbows, your stomach sags and your neck pokes forward. Keeping them off, makes the muscles of your trunk work and gradually helps you build more strength for sitting straight.

### **Get a headset**

It's so tempting to multitask and take a phone call while typing – holding it beautifully between your shoulder and your ear – but it's a disaster for your neck joints. If you really need to type and talk or you just spend large parts of the day on the phone, invest in a simple headset. It stops you squishing those joints and potentially irritating the nerves in your neck.

### **Drink more water**

Keep a jug of water at your desk and drink frequently during the day. Not only will this keep you hydrated, but having to take regular toilet breaks as a result will also help take the load off your back.

## **Body breaks**

So you've been working at your desk for a while and you're starting to feel that familiar ache creeping up your neck. Now is the time to try these great neck and back relievers that will not only rebalance your body but give your brain a break, too.

### ***Shoulder roll***

*Great for relieving neck tension*

- Push yourself back from the desk, let your hands rest in your lap, lift your head.
- Gently roll your shoulders backwards for five slow circles.

It's normal to hear a few cracks and crunches as you roll. Consider this the equivalent of moving a slightly rusty gearbox.

### ***Chest stretch***

*A lovely one to do while you are at the desk*

- Sit on the edge of your chair.
- Tuck your chin.
- Interlock your hands behind you.
- Gently stretch your arms back while slowly moving your chest forward. Hold for five slow breaths.

### ***Door stretches***

*Fabulous for stretching your back, chest and shoulders and reversing the effects of sitting*

- Find a doorway and stand slightly back from the frame with both elbows resting on either side of the door and your forearms vertical.
- Lift your head and look forward but keep your chin slightly tucked.
- Imagine you are zipping up a zipper that goes from your pubic bone to your belly button. This will activate your stomach and stop your back overarch.
- Let your chest drop into the doorway and you'll feel a fantastic stretch across your chest. Hold for five slow breaths.

*NB: If you have any problems with your shoulders, this stretch may not be ideal.*