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EHS News

Ergonomics and Your Health



Sitting could be killing you! Are you surprised? Probably not, because there has been lots of information about this online, in newspapers, research articles and books. Some of the health concerns associated with prolonged sitting are obesity, heart disease, diabetes and cancer. Your body is designed to move. It is not just a matter of how physically active you are, but also how much time you spend sitting. How can you improve your health if you have a job where you sit the majority of the day, like working on a computer, providing therapy to clients or driving a bus? Moving more is critical and, in some cases, ergonomic improvements can be helpful.

What does “moving more” mean and how can you incorporate it into your daily life? Joan Vernikos, former director of NASA’s life sciences division, recommends constant, natural movements that resist the force of gravity. Her emphasis is on the number of sit-to-stand adjustments rather than the length of time you stand. In other words, she recommends going from sitting to standing and back again 30-35 times a day. For a typical workday that would be about 16 times or twice an hour.

Here are a couple of Move More tips that can help you change your position during the day:

- The best way to alternate between sitting and standing during the day is to choose things that are easy to follow and maintain, based on your schedule, job, body condition and willingness to move more. When you work in an office, Dr. Alan Hedge of Cornell University recommends that in every 30 minutes people sit for 20 minutes, stand for eight minutes and then move around and stretch for two minutes. He does not recommend standing for longer than 10 minutes at a time.
- In an office computer work environment, some organizations have incorporated sit-to-stand workstations that promote posture changes throughout the workday and have positive ergonomic and health benefits. This type of ergonomic intervention can help the user work at the best-seated height and also provides an opportunity to work productively in a standing position.

Whether your department (or campus/medical center) has been able to incorporate these types of workstations into your environment or not, ultimately it is up to you to create a work environment that encourages you to fight gravity throughout the day. Whether you choose to stand up to speak on the phone or participate in a webinar, walk to a printer or take the stairs to collaborate with a colleague, it is important to move frequently throughout the day to stay healthy.

Mindfulness

Our bodies and our minds are not always aligned. In fact, a recent Harvard study published in Science demonstrates that our minds wander away from our task-at-hand approximately 47% of the time. Therefore, even though your body is here, your mind may be anywhere... drifting to the past (maybe a conversation you had earlier today), or to the future (perhaps you are thinking about your pressing to-do list).



Mindfulness Exercise

There are many ways that we can bring out attention to the present moment. One of the gateways is through our senses. If you like, you can try it right now, wherever you happen to be...

Begin by bringing your attention to your sense of sight.

Take a few moments to just look around, and really notice your surroundings, as if seeing this space for the first time...



Now shift your attention to your sense of hearing.

It might help to close your eyes, as you notice sounds that are nearby...and sounds that are far away...



Now bring your attention to your body, and your sense of touch.

Perhaps you notice your feet touching the floor. If you are sitting, you can bring your attention to the points where your body is making the most contact with the chair. You might even notice the air on your skin...



And finally, take a few moments to focus on your breath.

There's no need to change your breathing in anyway. Just feel the air as it enters your nose or your mouth, notice the subtle movements in your body as your lungs fill and empty, and notice sensations as your exhale



How was that to use your senses to bring yourself more fully into this moment?

There are various reactions to taking part in mindfulness exercises. Perhaps you found it challenging to keep your mind from wandering. Maybe, instead, it was relaxing. Some people think they should achieve a particular state, and feel concerned when they do not.

Whatever your experience, Kabat-Zinn (Mindfulness-Based Stressed Reduction founder) explains, "Mindfulness is not about getting anywhere else - it's about being where you are and knowing it."

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