



Good Ergonomics Make For Good Economics

By Amy Rice, MSPT, Center for Pain Management

In the minds of many business owners, the term "ergonomics" may equate to extravagant expenditures and an intangible return on investment. "Do I really have to replace all these chairs with ones that are more expensive and ergonomically approved?" you might ask. Not necessarily. With some relatively simple and inexpensive changes, you can address ergonomic issues and reap handsome rewards without breaking the bank.

Every year hundreds of thousands of employees miss work because of injury on the job. Repetitive or improper lifting of heavy objects may be an obvious cause of injuries, but some of the most costly injuries happen in sedentary settings, such as sitting in front of the computer for long periods of time or even poorly designed work stations.

For example, one employee diagnosed with Carpal Tunnel Syndrome can cost their employer about \$30,000 in medical bills and lost work time, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. But, supplying that one employee with a \$100 "ergonomically-approved" split keyboard could potentially avert repetitive wrist strain – and thwart that \$30,000 expense.

Helping employees find an efficient and pain-free way to do their jobs each day will pay off in dividends. Consider the long-term implications of not addressing the issue. Pain can become a chronic issue that impacts an employee's quality of life and lowers their morale, especially if the pain that started at work results in the employee's inability to carry out normal household tasks or enjoy everyday activities like walking the dog or holding a child. Pain also is the number one cause of insomnia. A sleep-deprived employee becomes less productive and more apt to make mistakes.

Implementing sound ergonomic policies and practices will prevent employee injuries, save money in the long-term, and make for healthier and happier employees. Not being proactive about ergonomics in the workplace can be expensive considering the costs attributed to

employee injury, loss of productivity, decreased morale, increased workers' compensation claims or increased insurance premiums.

The cost of a sedentary worker

Body position is the number one contributor to on-the-job injuries. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) states that people who sit in one position for the better part of each day, such as those who work at a computer, are at high risk for non-accidental back injury.

The healthy human body is built to tolerate sitting in one position for about 20 minutes at a time – and that's a *healthy* body. Consider how uncomfortable you get after sitting on an airplane, in a car or in a movie theatre.

Being sedentary in one (sometimes awkward) position slowly puts sustained stress on the muscles, ligaments, tendons and discs in the back. This causes a type of injury referred to as a repetitive stress injury, which includes neck strain, lower back pain and radiating leg pain. This type of injury is one of the most costly health and safety problems in the workplace today, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) states, accounting annually for nearly one-third of all serious job-related injuries and \$20 billion in workers' compensation costs.

These "office" injuries might not seem to equate to the tragic injuries that sometimes occur in the mining, construction or manufacturing industries; but they are serious, disabling and costly nonetheless. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, for instance, results in workers losing more

time from their jobs than any other type of workplace injury. It is the number one disability reported by insurance companies today, OSHA states, and comprised 62 percent of all North American workers' compensation claims in 2005.

What can you do that won't blow your budget?

Here are some specific and cost-effective tips for having healthier employees:

- Be proactive – avoid getting to the point of being reactionary to an employee's reported injury, which then results in a worker's compensation claim, interventional treatments and time off work. Think about the functional areas of your workplace that include the most at-risk individuals and start there.
- Adjusting the height of various work station elements often is central to achieving proper body positioning and avoiding repetitive-use injuries. Furnish your workplace with adjustable chairs, monitors, desks, tables and work surfaces to allow employees of different heights and body types to find healthy positions in which to work. This will be less expensive for you in the long-term.

- Encourage your employees to take regular stretch breaks or ask your human resource department to organize voluntary 15-minute walks around your workplace campus at lunch time. Partner with a local fitness center to offer discounted memberships as an employee benefit.
- Ask for help. Contact the Center for Pain Management to schedule a work-site assessment. We can arrange for an occupational therapist or other health professional to spend time observing your employees at work and identifying solutions to help subvert continued risk to your employees' health. OSHA also offers free (and non-punitive) on-site consultations to small businesses that are seeking help in creating safety and health programs or identifying and correcting hazards.

A comfortable, pain-free employee is a happy, productive employee. The return on your investment of time and resources addressing ergonomic issues and your employees' safety is a bit intangible – but the payoffs are immeasurable.

About the Author



Amy Rice, MSPT, brings more than 15 years experience in the pain management industry to her role as administrator of the Center for Pain Management, located in Indianapolis. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Pain Management, a licensed physical therapist and holds bachelor degrees in biology and music performance. As administrator, Amy manages day-to-day operations of the Center's medical practice and surgery center. The Center for Pain Management's team of board-certified pain physicians, psychologists, licensed physical therapists and supporting professional staff offers the most comprehensive, evidence-based diagnostic and treatment programs available to pain patients in Central Indiana. Expert services include a balanced mix of modalities including interventional treatments such as facet, spine or epidural injections or nerve blocks; and spinal cord stimulation, medication management, physical therapy and psychological evaluation. For more information, call 317-706-PAIN or e-mail arice@indypain.com.