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Ergonomics: Stopping Injuries Before They Start

New Angles on the Workplace: Ergonomist Diane Stinson is helping to redesign the way we work

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Warning: Your workplace could be causing you unnecessary pain and suffering, encouraging your co-workers to call in sick and foiling your attempts to be productive.

The good news is the problem could be a simple case of bad ergonomics caused by the way your space is set up, the equipment you use or how your day is organized.

In which case, a workplace assessment by Canadian Certified Professional Ergonomist Diane Stinson may be the cure to what ails your office.

Stinson founded her ergonomics and injury prevention firm [Healthworks Inc.](#) 21 years ago when she realized how many companies needed help. She noticed back pain was putting a major strain on big business — in fact, according to the [Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety](#), work-related musculoskeletal injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome and low-back pain are the most frequent type of lost-time work injury.

While ergonomics has enjoyed a recent surge in popularity, attaching itself to everything from chairs to shovels, the term is often misused. Broadly, ergonomics is the interdisciplinary study of human works. Ergonomists like Stinson assess how workers interact with tasks, equipment and environment.

“What I try to do is improve a person’s performance and decrease the stress in the workplace,” says Stinson. “I look at ways to improve workflow, reduce non-neutral postures and improve comfort while working.”

Sometimes the worst injuries come down to the tiniest details, including the measurements and angles of chairs, desks and other office equipment, how we bend over to pick up an item or how we spend our lunch hours.

Stinson has applied her ergonomic analysis to warehouses, offices and even RCMP patrol cars. But, in terms of ergonomics, the biggest workplace pain is our reliance on the computer. Spending all day parked at a desk, looking up at a monitor, cradling the phone on your shoulder, reaching too far for supplies, clicking a mouse with your palm facing down or sitting cross-legged all throw your body out of neutral posture.

The remedy could include specially designed, customizable equipment, including adjustable desks that allow workers to alternate between sitting and standing, vertical computer mice that reduce strain on wrists and chairs that keep hips, knees and backs at precisely the proper angle.

But ergonomics isn’t just about stuff, Stinson says. It’s about proper design — and some solutions don’t cost a dime.

“We have clients who have no budget for things, so we do what we can with what they have,” Stinson says. Creative and cost-effective solutions include using a phone book as a footrest, placing a rolled-up towel in the small of your back for added lumbar support, putting erasers under keyboards to create the proper tilt and taking advantage of the hands-free function on your phone.

Stinson’s first client, the Alberta Liquor Control Board, reduced back injuries by 26 percent in one year with the help of a back education and stretching program for warehouse and office workers. Avoiding injury could be as simple as a few head turns and shoulder rolls every 30 minutes. The point is to adjust everything to your specifications to get your workplace working with you, instead of against you.

For more information about ergonomics and Stinson’s work, visit healthworks.ca.