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Introduction

Computer use has increased dramatically in the past two decades. Twenty years ago offices looked very different from how they do today.

Many files are now stored on computer and documentation/information is readily available online. E-mail is rapidly replacing letters and faxes and even appointment books are being stored on computer.

Our changing workplace means that we are spending more and more time sitting in front of a computer. Not only do computers offer greater working flexibility, but you can work from any location and at any hour. The only limit on productivity is your body.

After long periods in front of a computer it is possible to develop discomfort or soreness in your forearms and hands. Soreness can also develop in your neck and shoulders or lower back.

Eyestrain is another common symptom associated with long periods in front of a computer. Did you know that computer use cannot harm your eyesight. However, our eye muscles can become tired after staring at your computer screen all day, making it more difficult to focus.

Repetitive strain injury (RSI) is a common name used to describe problems that have developed by using a computer. As well as injury, studies show a loss of concentration and increased errors after long periods at a computer.

Discomfort and health problems caused by computer use are very common. You can avoid these problems by pacing your work and putting balance back into your workday.

Why do Computers cause problems??

First let's look at why computers cause problems.

- ❖ When using a computer do you notice that your posture is static and changes very little?
- ❖ Did you realise that your muscles are tense for long periods when you hold your hands over the computer keyboard?
- ❖ Did you know that your muscles are also tense when you grip your mouse for long periods?
- ❖ Do you focus your eyes on the VDU for long periods?

If your muscles remain tense for long periods of time, blood flow becomes restricted. This reduces the supply of energy from the blood and prevents metabolic waste products from being carried away. Eventually you will feel your muscles becoming tired and sore.

What you may be surprised to learn is that even low levels of muscle tension can cause this if sustained over a long period. If you are stressed you will notice muscle tension even further.

Did you know that just 18% of maximum force is enough to reduce blood flow to the muscle by 80%.

If you have muscle fatigue or tension and continue to work intensely at your computer, you are likely to experience pain and discomfort and could develop repetitive strain injury (RSI).

The term repetitive strain injury is a confusing one and as a result, there are many misunderstandings. Let us take a few moments to look at the true cause of RSI in computer use.

For computer users it is actually static muscle tension, not repetition that causes most of the problems. This means that you do not have to be the fastest typist to get RSI. Just spending too many hours at your computer can be enough.

What's the Solution?

Breaks are a proven way to allow your mind and muscles to recover from fatigue. Stretches and exercise also rejuvenate your muscles. Breaks help you to improve your overall health and efficiency.

However, do you find that you so often get caught up in your work that remembering to take enough breaks at the right times is difficult? Often you may not take a break until you feel tired.

Achieving the right amount of muscle recovery at the right times is more complicated than you might think. Muscles recover very quickly from low levels of fatigue but quite slowly from high levels. Once your muscles become tired and sore, recovery takes a long time.

Recovery at frequent periods from low-level fatigue will take only around ten seconds whereas high levels of fatigue will take much longer – even up to several hours. One solution to muscle fatigue is to take micro-pauses, very short breaks of 5-10 seconds every 4-10 minutes. This relaxes your muscles and restores a healthy blood flow.

Why are micro-pauses so important?

- ❖ They take very little time and can easily be developed to become a healthy habit
- ❖ They prevent fatigue build up
- ❖ They are taken before discomfort occurs

Micro-pauses are the most effective and efficient breaks you can take but remembering to take them can be difficult.

Although micro-pauses are the key, longer breaks away from the computer are also important.

You should remember that breaks need to be taken before you become tired and sore. Exactly when and how often you take breaks is also more important than how long the break is for.

Recent research studies have shown that taken breaks are proven to help reduce fatigue and prevent soreness.

Consequently as well as micro-pauses, you need to take time away from the computer occasionally to stretch and focus. If you have been working intensely at your computer for an hour or more you should take a break.

So if you are working intensely at your computer, in order to reduce fatigue and prevent soreness, the following breaks need to be incorporated into your daily working practice:

- ❖ Breaks every hour or so
- ❖ Micro-pauses every 4-10 minutes

Micro-pauses

At about 4-10 minute intervals, let go of your mouse and look away from the screen. Drop your arms down to your sides, lean back and allow your shoulders to “droop” and relax. A micro-pause should take some 5-10 seconds.

Breaks

After an hour or so of working continuously at your computer, you should take a short break away from you workstation. Do some non-computer work, make a telephone call, file documents. Anything that is away from you computer for 2-3 minutes.

Exercises

During a break it is also good to do stretches and exercises to rejuvenate your muscles:

- ❖ **Shoulder stretch** – clasp you hands tightly together and stretch your arms above and behind your head.
- ❖ **Upper arm Stretch** – place one arm across your chest and grasp the elbow with the other hand and pull lightly stretching the shoulders
- ❖ **Sitting trunk twist** – clasp your hands out in front of you in a seated position and gently twist from side to side, stretching the upper and lower back.
- ❖ **Elbow stretch** – stretch one arm out in front of you. Clasp the hand with the free hand and bend your hand gently downward stretching the forearm muscles.

How to remind your self to take a break

As previously discussed the hardest part is remembering to take enough breaks at the right times especially when you are busy at work.

There are some user friendly software programs available that remind you to take a pause or break. Some are very good and are proving more popular. If you are not ready to pause immediately the programme will wait whilst you finish your current task.

These programs will show how well you are doing, how intensely you are using the computer and how good you have been at taking breaks.

If you would like more information on the programs available or for information on what type of programme is likely to meet your requirements contact Saracen Office Interiors on the telephone number below.

Call Saracen Office Interiors on 0870 743 0930 for further information

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