

Excerpt by Marya Danihel from Women's Health Guidebook Written in affiliation with a major Boston medical school

A Healthy Workplace

With more and more of us spending at least half of our waking lives at work, the quality of work environments is increasingly important to our health. Health isn't something we acquire or maintain just in our leisure time, at the gym or on weekends. At work, just as at home, our physical surroundings have a profound effect on our well-being. Employers are beginning to realize that their employees' quality of life at work directly affects productivity. Consequently, they are sponsoring preventive health programs to keep their workers well. With or without the support of an employer, there are many things workers can do to keep themselves healthy on the job.

Ergonomics and Injury Prevention (Source for this section: Harvard U. Office of EHS)
Ergonomics is the study and design of equipment and physical tasks to fit the worker. For example, an ergonomically designed chair provides good support for the lumbar curve in the lower back—support that is essential for someone who sits for several hours each day. Failure to observe ergonomic principles can lead to cumulative trauma disorders (CTDs), which are a rapidly growing category of workplace injury.

CTDs, also known as Repetitive Strain Injuries (RSIs), are adverse health effects that arise from very slight injuries repeated many times. A poor fit between human and instrument, improper technique while performing a physical task, and lack of physical conditioning and postural awareness set the stage for CTDs. Several kinds of CTDs are associated with computer usage.

- **Carpal tunnel syndrome**—In this illness a major nerve in the wrist is compressed by swollen tendons, resulting in numbness and tingling in the thumb and first three fingers. Those who spend long hours at the keyboard or at a supermarket check-out counter (performing repetitive motions and not resting often enough) are frequently afflicted with carpal tunnel syndrome.
- **Cubital tunnel syndrome**—Rarer than carpal tunnel syndrome, this illness also arises from compression of a nerve—in this case, the ulnar nerve, which passes through the elbow. Leaning the forearm on the sharp edge of a desk can cause this condition, which is characterized by tingling and numbness in the ring and little fingers.
- **Eyestrain**—Headaches, burning eyes, and blurred vision can result from glare and flicker on a computer screen, by staring at the screen for a long time, or by poor contrast between font and background.
- **Back, neck, and shoulder pain**—Poor posture or badly designed seating causes back, neck, shoulder and chest muscles to tighten, leading to muscle aches and stiffness and sometimes to tension headaches.

Are you at risk for a CTD?

Compare the set-up of your office with the diagram below and make adjustments if necessary. Unlike acute injuries (a fracture or a cut, for example), CTDs happen gradually. You may be hurting your body by the way you work, but not enough damage has accumulated yet to cause pain. If you *do* experience pain and fatigue while working, get help without delay. CTDs treated early usually heal completely; CTDs ignored can lead to permanent difficulty in performing everyday tasks.