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How to make working on your laptop better for your body

Laptop computers are lightweight, portable and convenient, allowing us to work anywhere. But with many people now using laptops as their primary computer, even though they were originally designed as a temporary alternative to desktop computers, the risk of injury is high.

“Unfortunately, the laptop’s compact design, with attached screen and keyboard, forces laptop users into awkward postures.” said Isla Galloway-Gaul, Managing Director of Inspiration Office, an Africa-wide office space and furniture consultancy.

“Laptops pose less risk when used for short periods of time, but nowadays many people use laptops all day. This creates an ongoing tradeoff between poor neck/head posture and poor hand/wrist posture which can lead to aches and pains and even more permanent repetitive strain or musculoskeletal type injuries to the back, neck and wrists.”

She noted that this means that people need to pay special attention to the ergonomics of how they use laptops because they are designed with portability – not necessarily user health in mind.

Top laptop tips for optimal ergonomic use:

- “Companies should consider installing laptop stands to allow workers to use their laptops to the optimal height which is level with the eyes. Tilting your head forwards all day put an enormous strain on the neck and back. We are simply not designed to sit stooped forward for hours each day,” Galloway-Gaul noted.
- Laptop stands correctly positioned encourages healthy posture and stress-free movements while also reducing the glare caused by ambient lighting. Experts recommend to keep a distance between 50 and 70cm between eye and screen. “This will reduce eyestrain, one of the most common physical problems encountered in the workplace which 60% of workers experiencing it once a week,” said Galloway-Gaul.
- She also suggested using a remote keyboard when working on a laptop in the office. “Obviously if the laptop is placed on a stand, the keyboard is far too high to reach”
- Combined with adjusting chair height, workers should adjust the keyboard angle to maintain a neutral, flat wrist position because hands and wrists should be kept in a straight wrist posture when typing and should not rest on a palm rest, table or lap while typing. “This is particularly important to avoid carpal tunnel syndrome, the trapping or compression of the median nerve as it passed through the wrist into the hand,” Galloway-Gaul advised.
- Break work into smaller segments and switch between tasks that use different motions. For example, alternate use of mouse with reading and searching the web. Keep your head and neck in a relaxed posture; avoid excessive neck flexion or rotation to see the screen.
- “Schedule mini-breaks every 30 to 40 minutes to avoid repetition and static positions,” Galloway-Gaul said.
- If you have to raise your chair, use a footrest to support your feet. When seated your hips should be slightly higher than your knees.
- If you are using just the laptop to work, attach an external mouse instead of using the small constricted touchpad. This will prevent overusing one side of the body too much.”

After the work day is done, many people go home and use the computer for an additional 2 to 4 hours per night. “But your body does not know the difference between computer work at home or work. All it knows is that it is being stressed. So it is a good idea to remember these principles for home too,” she concluded.

