

How important are workplace ergonomics to avoid back pain?



Ergonomics is the study of how the human body is affected by conditions in the work environment. Ergonomic design (products that are designed specifically for user comfort, safety and ease) aims to ensure that tasks, equipment, and the general work environment is suited to and comfortable for each employee.

Most people think ergonomics is as straightforward as having the right chair and desk, at the right height and position. Indeed, there is a widespread assumption that these factors (along with our posture, of course) are the key determinants to avoiding back pain.

You may be surprised to find out that there is actually a lack of evidence to support the effectiveness of ergonomics in the workplace in the prevention of back pain. For example, there is very little evidence to show that ergonomic interventions – such as lumbar chair supports, specific desk heights, and other ergonomic considerations – are effective in reducing back pain.

In fact, rather than a specific workstation setup or posture, the strongest indicators of risk of lower back pain are:

- Having a previous history of back pain
- Psychological distress

These factors hold a much closer association with the development of back pain than the ergonomics of your office set-up.

While the evidence is lacking on workplace ergonomics, there is a great amount of evidence to suggest that exercise is one of the most beneficial things to do to avoid back pain. In addition to this, it is of course important to fully understand your pain, how you got it and how to create an optimistic view on your pain as well as how to best manage it on a day-to-day basis. Information is key!

When it comes to back pain, consider your hierarchy of needs. Your number one focus should be to stay active within your current load tolerance. This can be anything from taking short breaks when working at a desk to doing simple exercises at work – and remaining active when you are finished at work, too.

Prioritise staying active over trying to achieve the perfect workspace or posture. The evidence doesn't lie – this is the most scientifically supported way of both preventing and alleviating back pain.

Of course, once you have established an active routine, there is no harm in taking a look at the ergonomics in your workplace. It's worth remembering that research is based on a population and average level, therefore in some individual cases, making ergonomic modifications may be effective. Just keep in mind that the greatest weapon in your arsenal in the fight against back pain is exercise and activity. So, give it a try and see what happens!

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