Keeping Your Back Healthy At Work

By now, you've probably heard about how harmful it is to sit behind a desk for too long. Research has shown that periods of prolonged sitting can lead to an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, and even some types of cancer.

Working a sedentary desk job – which roughly 86 percent of us do, according to some estimates - can also be bad for your back. Since sitting simply can't be avoided for most office workers, here are some tips to keep your back and neck supported during the work day.

- **Pay attention to ergonomics**. People who work in jobs that require a lot of sitting should have ergonomic chairs, lumbar support and a foot rest to help maintain posture for the low back. For workers who sit more than two hours continuously, it's best to have a desk that lifts to a standing position. The height of the computer screen should be optimized to allow the cervical spine (neck) to be in a neural position, not bent forward or backwards too much. It's also key to minimize using the hand with an elbow on the desk to support the neck under the chin. This creates too much extension of the neck and can irritate the joints.

- **Avoid repetitive activities.** To protect the low back, avoid repetitive lifting from the floor to waist level. If necessary, use your legs and try to have objects you need as close to the body as possible. When it comes to protecting the neck, keep in mind that repetitive lifting above the shoulders will irritate the neck and shoulders (particularly the rotator cuff).

- **Take Breaks!** A good rule of thumb is to take a five minute break every hour. Since we all get busy and lose track of time, it might be wise to set an alarm on your computer to remind yourself when it's time to get up and move. During your breaks, walk around and stretch your low back (which could mean something as simple as bringing your knees to your chest), hamstrings and hip muscles. If leaving your desk is impossible, consider standing up while talking on the phone or handling other tasks.