

# Workstation Basics and Healthy Work Hints

This worksheet outlines how you should go about setting yourself up correctly at a computer workstation. Good workstation set-up requires attention to your position from the 'floor up'. Start this set-up exercise pushed back from the desk so that you think about your body and comfort, rather than automatically moulding yourself around the desk (and back in to your old habits).

1. Your **feet** should be flat on the floor.
2. Your **chair height** should be adjusted so that your thighs rest evenly along the length of the seat (check that your trouser seam is horizontal). This might be much lower than your normal seat height.
3. Adjust the **seat back height** so that the **lumbar support** fits snugly into your lower back. The lumbar curve is at about waist height, and this is where the lumbar support should fit.
4. Adjust the **angle of the seat back** so that you lean slightly back. Not reclined like a lounge chair, but so you can relax back into the support without falling forwards *or* needing to actively push back. Whilst resting on the chair back you should be able to easily view the screen and reach to the keyboard.
5. Some chairs may have additional **forward seat tilt adjustments** that can be comfortable if you have back problems. It may take some getting used to (especially with slippery clothing), but the seat tilt takes some pressure off the lower back, and gives a more active work posture that may be easier to rise from. Even a very small tilt can make a difference. (NB if you have had an old chair with a reverse tilt, the forward tilt may take quite a lot of getting used to, but will probably be a vast improvement).
6. Some newer chairs may have an additional **sliding seat pan adjustment** that benefits tall people who may find office chairs to be 'too short'. With your bottom right to the back of the seat, the seat pan should come to about 5 centimetres (two to three fingers width) from the back of your knee.
7. Once the chair is feeling more comfortable... close your eyes, and imagine that you are putting your hands onto a keyboard, while you are very relaxed. Check that your shoulders are relaxed, and that your arms are relaxed at the elbow. Take a slow deep breath, and as you let it out, **relax onto this imaginary keyboard**. Open your eyes, and without moving your hands, check where they are positioned *now*, in comparison to where they are normally positioned on the keyboard. What is the height difference? It may be that your hands are resting on your thighs, and this is fine.

This is the **ideal height for your keyboard** on top of the desk. Many people find that this feels extremely low at first, but after a day or two with their feet actually reaching the floor, wonder how they could ever work 'perched' up as high as they used to. Adjust your desk to this height if you are able (and consider the shoes you normally wear). Some desks with a drawer under the desktop at the sitting space, a very 'thick' desktop, or with support structures where your knees should be, are unsuitable for use as they demand working with shoulders raised to reach the keyboard. If the desk is too tall, it will be a sound investment in your comfort to either have the desk made shorter or to purchase a new desk of the correct height/with a height adjusting capacity. Remember that it is much easier to make a desk higher than shorter, so even if a tall person uses the desk after you, all is not lost. *And buyer beware* - many desks on the market are still built to the 'old' taller height expectation, despite the fact that most users do not require this, and that they exceed recommended desk heights. Many chairs do not have adequate height range to give a correct work height, even at their highest adjustment.

8. If your desk cannot be adjusted, or does not adjust enough for you, you may need to use a **footstool** to support your legs. Good foot support prevents poor circulation (from constantly crossing your legs), sore backs (from pulling forward out of the chair), fidgeting to find places on the chair to support your feet and can accommodate high heels. It is however best to have your feet flat on the floor at the correct height desk, as it is much easier to propel yourself in your chair with your legs rather than pushing and pulling with your already hard-working hands and arms.
9. Your **keyboard** should be placed flat, not angled up at the back as this overworks our small arm and hand muscles. It should be positioned so that with your upper arms hanging loosely and with shoulders relaxed you can comfortably position your hands on the keyboard. This is usually 10 or 15 cm from the front of the desk.

10. If you use a **wrist and/or mouse rest**, remember that the purpose is to provide a rest for when you are not keying. Don't anchor your wrists on it when keying as this puts increased strain on your small forearm muscles. Let your hands 'flop' on the wrist rest when you are not actively keying, preferably in a slightly 'thumbs up' position. This allows your small forearm muscles to relax optimally.
11. Your **screen** should be directly in front of you, at about an arms length away. You should also look slightly down into the centre of the screen, as this allows your eye muscles to be at their most relaxed. The top of the screen will usually be about horizontal with your eyes.
12. **Left mouse?** If you write with your right hand, it is well worth considering changing your 'mouse hand' to your left. While this feels awkward for the first few weeks, it is very important to not overwork your dominant hand by mousing, keying *and* writing (etc!). Right handed mousing demands that we stretch beyond the numeric numbers on the keyboard - this is extra work that can contribute to discomfort.  
  
Go through the Control Panel to alter the mouse control to left sided – ensuring that the following three adjustments are made: **a)** change the main click button to be operated with the left index finger; **b)** slow down the double click speed, and **c)** slow the mouse speed so that it can be operated with a gross movement (rather than the fine actions that you may have been able to do with your right hand). These changes allow our somewhat clumsy left hand to gain the necessary 'mouse skills'. Often you can speed things up again after a week or two. If you are left handed, again be sure that you balance the work that you do with your hands to reduce the risk of overworking one side.
13. **Micropause every 3 to 5 minutes, for 10 seconds.** A micropause is a small relaxation break that allows your muscles to refresh their blood supply, and to work for longer and be healthier with the increase in oxygen that occurs. The increased circulation also aids the removal of lactic acid from the muscles, which reduces the pain and stiffness that we may experience from muscle overwork. Lactic acid may occur if we force the muscle to work for long periods of time without an adequate oxygen supply. This pain and stiffness is a part of 'occupational overuse'. Have 5 minutes '**rest break**' away from the keyboard every hour, and don't forget to take your '**normal breaks**' - morning and afternoon tea, and lunch breaks. Micropauses and rest breaks are most critical for those completing intensive keying and mousing tasks.
14. **Keep fit and S-T-R-E-T-C-H!** Stretching lengthens muscle fibres, and prevents painful 'knots' and tender points. Keeping fit with aerobic or 'puffing' exercise helps to get rid of the lactic acid in busy muscles, and strengthening exercise makes muscles stronger so that it is easier for them to complete the work.
  - Neck stretches
  - Stretches for your arms and front of your chest
  - Forearm and hand stretchesStretch as often as you need, every hour is good, more often if it feels good. Stretch to prevent problems, not just if you feel sore. Get lots of general exercise.
15. **Drink plenty of water.** Water makes up most of our body and if we don't have enough we get dehydrated, and our muscles are unable to work properly. The extra loo stops can make good rest breaks too!
16. **Relax.** De-stress. Keep calm. It sounds easy... but can be difficult when the pressure is on. Stress makes us more tense, and overworks our muscles more. Address issues within your work organisation that are overloading you or causing undue pressure. Get help if necessary.
17. Consider the **organisation of your work**. If you are overloaded, working long hours, have periods where you are 'crazy busy' and struggle to keep up, or peaks and troughs in your workload (especially if not enough troughs), consider ways to address the issues as they may create higher risks for discomfort, pain or injury.
18. Check the ACC website - [www.acc.org.nz](http://www.acc.org.nz) for resources. The 'HabitAtWork' resource is very useful.