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Eve Tahmincioglu, author, journalist and columnist for MSNBC's *Your Career*.

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The recession ate my ergonomic chair

SIT UP STRAIGHT PEOPLE!

Is work giving you a pain in the neck?

I'm not surprised given today's workplace. It's making us all want to slump down in our chairs.

Workers who still have jobs are doing the work of one or more employees; pay and benefits have been cut for many; and who has the time or money to go to the gym these days.

It's a recipe for ergonomic disaster.

Yes **ERGONOMIC**. Remember that word? Haven't heard much about that lately have you?

It's no surprise. Employers are doing everything they can to trim costs and that means big investments in ergonomic chairs and ergonomic consultants don't always make business sense.

And tell me which employee in his or her right mind is going to ask their boss for a fancy chair when they've just been furloughed for the third time this year, or had their vacation time cut?

This situation is unfortunate because the extra work and stress is doing a number on many of our bodies.

"People are over worked and stressed out and they're getting muscle problems, back problems and all kinds of other problems," said Kathleen Hall, founder of the **Stress Institute**.

The actual numbers on workplace related injuries are murky. Since fewer people are employed, the overall numbers have declined. And the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's recent numbers on such injuries also show a drop.

But **OSHA has come under fire recently** for horribly underreporting work-related mishaps; and many ergonomic experts believe worker injuries that are not severe enough to warrant workers' compensation often go unreported.

Even though OSHA shows an overall decline, there was an uptick in one category: older workers.

The number of injuries and illnesses to workers 55 to 64 years old and workers 65 and older increased 3 percent and 13 percent, respectively.

One March **study done by Frank Schmid** of the National Council on Compensation Insurance found that indeed injuries as a percentage of the total workforce do rise during a recession.

No matter what the numbers show, if you're feeling achy lately, you need to take it seriously.

This from Dr. Fernando Branco, medical director at South Florida's Rosomoff Comprehensive Pain Center at the Miami Jewish Health



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Systems: Computer-related injuries (also known as ergonomic disorders) in particular have become one of the most frequent causes of occupational injury. If left uncorrected, these have the potential for developing into more serious repetitive strain injuries.

More often than not, simple modifications to a person's work environment can make a big difference.

I asked the Rosomoff center to come up with some easy things you can do to make your workspace more body friendly.

Dr. Elsayed Abdel-Moty from Rosomoff offered these tips to prevent desktop computer-related and repetitive stress injuries:

Arranging your work area:

- Place your computer monitor directly in front of you and align yourself with the monitor and keyboard.
- Position the top of the monitor at eye level and about an arm's length away.
- Use a document holder to place source documents close to your computer screen.
- Alternate the location of the document holder from one side to the other to avoid concentration of stress on one side of your neck.
- Adjust your keyboard and chair height to keep your forearms, wrists, and hands in a straight line. Your keyboard should fall directly below your hands with your elbows at about 90 degrees.
- Select a chair that allows clearance behind the knees - that is, the seat should not be too deep.
- Use the backrest of the chair to provide full support, particularly for the lower back.
- Reduce glare by adding an anti-glare filter, decreasing overhead lighting, or shading your windows. And don't forget to clean your monitor screen often!

Maintaining your posture:

- Always sit with your head and neck in an upright position even while typing and/or using the telephone - use a headset if you need to.
- Maintain a proper posture of a 90-degree angle at both your hips and knees while keeping your knees supported by having your feet on the floor or a footrest.
- Keep your shoulders relaxed and your elbows close to your body.
- And of course, take frequent breaks. Don't sit or stand too long. Stretch, shift position, or take a short walk.

I'd also suggest contacting your doctor if your pain is starting to impact your work, or your mood because every individual's situation is different.

Case in point, I recently started physical therapy because my lower back has been hurting and my PT guy suggested I not sit in a 90-degree angle but have my hips a bit above my knees when sitting at my desk.

It's all about figuring out what's best for you folks.

So, let's all buck the trend and bring back the ergonomic dialogue. People may look at you like you're a ghost from the 1990s but who cares. It's your health damn it!