

Ergonomics in Your Home

Ergonomic principles are a set of injury-prevention tools for use at home. Why? Ergonomics uses posture and biomechanical principles as a way to alleviate stress, injury and fatigue on joints and muscles. Who could not use a few tips on how to avoid the aches and pains that come from performing household chores and tasks? Use the following information to learn more about ergonomics.

Ergonomics

Ergonomics is used to minimize strain to the body, thus improving the performance and results of a task. The way you hold your body when sweeping the floor, sewing a button or unclogging a drain can result in undue stress on joints, muscles and nerves if done improperly. All of this can lead to musculoskeletal disorders.

By implementing ergonomic principles into your household routines, you can improve job performance while preventing injury. Think of it this way: you are shoveling the snow off the driveway. You are doing this by bending at the waist and hoisting up large portions of snow with a standard snow shovel. You repeat this bend, lift and hoist method until you pull a muscle in your lower back; you can no longer shovel. If you had used ergonomic principles (bending at the knees, lifting small amounts of snow, using an ergonomically correct shovel), chances are your back would have been fine, and the driveway would have been cleared.

Risky Activities

Activities that seem simple, such as gardening or sweeping, actually can cause problems if performed incorrectly or repeatedly over an extended period of time. Cumulative wear and tear on joints, muscles, tendons, nerves and cartilage can lead to carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, lower back pain and muscle spasms. The following activities can increase the risk of musculoskeletal disorders:

- Repetitive-motion hobbies or activities, such as needle point or sewing
- Forceful exertion, including hammering or lifting heavy objects
- Awkward postures, such as bending over the dishwasher or working on the garbage disposal
- Contact pressure, typically from leaning wrists on a sharp desk edge while typing or using one hand to hammer in many nails
- Vibration, including working for prolonged periods with electric tools such as a circular saw
- Harsh environmental conditions, such as sewing in a dimly-lit room or working outdoors in extremely hot or extremely cold temperatures
- Activities of long duration, such as pulling weeds for a continuous amount of time with no breaks

Using Ergonomics When Doing Household Tasks

By applying ergonomic principles to simple household chores, you can prevent possible musculoskeletal disorders. Follow these seven rules:

1. Break up activities into smaller chunks of time. This will give body parts time to recover, get your circulation and blood flowing, and give you a mental break so your focus will be at 100 percent when you resume.
2. Have the proper equipment for a job. For instance, if you are hammering large nails, use a large hammer; if you are sewing, have adequate lighting; do not cut metal with a wood saw.
3. Purchase ergonomically designed equipment and tools to make completing tasks less stressful on your body. Everything from brooms and shovels to shock-absorbing gloves and computer keyboards are now made with ergonomic principles in mind.
4. Keep equipment well maintained to prevent having to use extra pressure or force to complete a task.
5. Dress and prepare for the weather. In warm weather wear a hat and light, loose clothing; in cold weather dress in layers to keep your muscles warm and limber. Be sure to always have a bottle of water to keep hydrated.
6. Keep yourself in good physical shape. Thirty minutes of exercise a day is a minimal sacrifice compared to the hours spent recovering from injury. Consult your doctor about the type of exercise that is best for you.
7. Always avoid awkward posture. This is very important for all tasks, but especially when lifting objects. Instead of bending at the lower back, bend at the knee so your spine is kept in a neutral, relaxed position. A relaxed spine is how your spine is positioned when you are sitting up straight with your shoulders relaxed. This position reduces the chance of stress-related injury than bending and lifting with your back. It may take a few tries before it becomes a habit, but it is worth the effort.

People at Risk

While there are ways to prevent musculoskeletal injuries, some people are more prone to these injuries. Contact your doctor if you have any of the following conditions:

- Family history of osteoporosis
- Systemic disease such as rheumatoid arthritis or diabetes
- Poor physical health, including obesity, smoking and lack of fitness
- Previous injuries, musculoskeletal strains, sprains and tendonitis

Additionally, as we age, we do not heal as quickly and have more years of wear and tear on our bodies. Thus, we may incur injuries with relatively less stress to the body. People who participate in high-risk hobbies, such as skiing or mountain biking, may be more susceptible to musculoskeletal injuries because the high-impact nature of the sport may cause more wear and tear on the body. Anyone who falls into one of the above categories or who participates in activities that are known to cause musculoskeletal stress should take extra precaution and implement ergonomics into their daily lives.

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