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THE DESK-BOUND PROFESSIONAL

An ergonomic guide to working without pain

01 WHY YOUR WORKSTATION MATTERS

Most desk-related pain is preventable. The problem is not that people sit — it is that they sit in the same position, under the same load, for hours at a time without movement.

> *No posture is inherently harmful. Holding any position for a prolonged period — without breaks, without variety — is what causes pain. The goal is not perfect posture. It is managed, varied movement through a well-configured workspace.*

Who this guide is for

This white paper was written for professionals who spend much of their working day at a desk both within the office environment and at home. Whether you are managing an existing complaint or simply want to protect your body from the cumulative effects of desk work, the guidance here is clinically grounded and practically applicable.

What good ergonomics means

Ergonomics is not about finding one perfect posture and holding it. It is about configuring your environment so that the demands placed on your body throughout the working day are varied, manageable, and well-supported. Three things determine what your workstation should look like: you as an individual, the nature of your work, and the specific tasks that make up the bulk of your working time.

02 DESK SETUP

FIXED HEIGHT DESK

Build the workstation around the desk height. Set your chair to match the desk surface — prioritising wrist comfort above all else. If your legs then hang, use a footrest. A mat under the chair allows you to move freely and protects the floor.

VARIABLE HEIGHT DESK

Build the workstation around you. Set the desk height so your elbows rest comfortably at desk level with shoulders relaxed. Consider how frequently you reach for documents — and how often you actually alternate between sitting and standing.

ELEVATION PLATFORMS

Useful for raising screens, laptops, or secondary monitors. Consider how often you reach for documents placed on the platform — frequent reaching can create its own postural load.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Line of sight to windows, clutter on the desk surface, and appearance to visitors in video calls all influence how you position yourself. Address these alongside the physical setup.

03 GETTING YOUR CHAIR RIGHT — SEVEN STEPS

Chair adjustment is the single highest-impact ergonomic intervention. Most office chairs are highly adjustable — yet the majority of professionals never configure them properly. Work through these seven steps in order.

1	Feet flat on the floor. Use a footrest if the desk is fixed and your feet don't reach comfortably without raising the chair.
2	Knees and hips at approximately 90 degrees. Avoid seats that slope the thighs downward sharply.
3	Tilt the seat pan for a neutral pelvis — neither tucked under nor excessively tilted forward. Some anterior tilt is natural and beneficial.
4	Adjust arm rests to support elbows at desk height, allowing the shoulders to remain completely relaxed throughout the working day.
5	Bring the chair back up to meet your upper back — the back rest should support you, not sit behind you while you lean forward.
6	Add lumbar support — positioned at the natural inward curve of the lumbar spine, not at the mid-back.
7	Adjust the head rest if present so it supports without pushing your head forward into a chin-protruding position.

04 KEYBOARD AND MOUSE POSITIONING

ELBOW AND WRIST POSITION

Elbows supported at a height that allows the shoulders to remain relaxed and not elevated. Wrists should be level with or just below the elbows — neutral, comfortable, not bent upward or downward.

KEYBOARD DISTANCE

One of the most common errors is placing the keyboard too far from the body, forcing the shoulders to reach forward throughout the day. The keyboard should sit close enough that the upper arms hang naturally.

SEPARATE KEYBOARD

A separate keyboard is always preferred over a laptop keyboard. Laptop keyboards are narrower and force rounded shoulders — particularly when the laptop is at desk level rather than elevated.

LAPTOP USE

When using a laptop for prolonged periods, elevate it on a stand and attach a separate keyboard and mouse. This allows the screen to be at the correct height without compromising wrist position.

05 SCREEN HEIGHT AND ORIENTATION

The single most common screen error is placing it too low. The result is hours of sustained neck flexion — one of the primary drivers of cervicogenic headache and upper cervical pain.

Your natural, relaxed eye line should fall at the top third of the display — not the centre. Position the screen directly in front of you. Avoid any neck rotation or lateral twist to see the screen.

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06 CALLS & MEETINGS - REDUCING STATIC POSTURE TIME

Task type	Screen height adjustment
Document work (Word, PDF)	Slightly higher — reading occurs in the upper two thirds of the screen
Spreadsheets (Excel)	Slightly lower — work typically concentrated in the top-left corner of the spreadsheet
Web browsing	Account for browser toolbars and tabs reducing usable screen height by 1–2 inches
Varifocal lenses	Consult your optician — varifocals alter the head position needed to focus on screen content
Glare	Position screens perpendicular to windows — glare causes involuntary forward lean which loads the cervical spine

Calls and meetings are an underutilised opportunity to reduce static posture time. Most professionals default to sitting at their desk for every call — even audio-only ones. A small shift in habit here can meaningfully reduce total daily static load.

CAMERA ON OR OFF?

If you don't need to be seen, switch the camera off. You can move freely, change posture, stand, and walk — reducing the time you are locked to your screen.

WALKING MEETINGS

Audio-only calls are an opportunity for movement. Use wireless headphones and walk for the duration of the call. This is also associated with improved focus and creative thinking.

PHONE VS HEADSET

Never hold a phone between ear and shoulder — this creates significant cervical loading. Use a headset or speakerphone to keep your hands free and your cervical spine neutral.

CALL SCHEDULING

Book calls just before lunch or end of day. People are naturally motivated to keep these brief. Less time on the call means less static posture time for everyone in the meeting.

07 MOVEMENT HABITS AND THE BRUGGER RESET

The most effective single intervention for desk-related pain is regular, structured movement. Not a standing desk. Not an ergonomic chair. Movement.

Your movement schedule

Frequency	Action	How	Why
Every 20 minutes	Small posture reset	Shift position, roll shoulders, chin tuck	*Prevents cumulative static loading on the spine*
Every 60 minutes	Get up and move	Get a drink, walk to a colleague, sit-to-stand	*Hip flexors shorten after 45–60 mins — movement resets resting length*
Between tasks	Change position	Use task transitions as natural micro-breaks	*No additional time cost — change task when you change position*

The Brugger Relief Position — your daily reset

The Brugger position actively counteracts the flexion pattern of prolonged desk work. Practice it every 20–30 minutes for 5–10 seconds. It takes less time than a sip of coffee.

1	Find your neutral pelvis — sit at the front of your chair, weight evenly on your sitting bones
2	Gently brace your core — breathe naturally throughout
3	Drop your shoulder blades down and back — away from your ears
4	Turn your palms outward — this externally rotates the shoulders and opens the chest
5	Gently retract your head — chin tuck, not chin down. The movement is backward, not downward.
6	Push your tongue gently to the roof of your mouth — this activates the deep neck flexors
7	Hold for 5–10 seconds. Release completely. Repeat throughout the day.

08 NECK STRETCHES AT YOUR DESK

These four stretches can be performed at your desk without leaving your seat. They are most effective when done regularly — every 60–90 minutes — rather than as a one-off response to pain.

Lateral neck tilt

Tilt your head so your ear moves toward your shoulder. Hold 15–20 seconds. Press the opposite hand gently toward the floor to deepen the stretch. Swap sides. Avoid elevating the shoulder of the stretching side.

Neck rotation

Slowly rotate your head to look over each shoulder. Move within a comfortable, pain-free range. Pause at each end for 5–10 seconds. Never force range of movement.

Chin tuck

Gently retract your head straight backward — as if giving yourself a double chin. This resets the cervical spine and directly reduces upper cervical and suboccipital tension from forward head posture.

Look up / look down

Slowly look toward the ceiling, then down toward your chest. Pause briefly at each end. Excellent for releasing tension from prolonged screen time and activating the full range of cervical movement.

09 COMMON CONDITIONS — CAUSES AND FIXES

The following six conditions are among the most frequently seen in desk-based professionals. In the majority of cases, they have clear ergonomic root causes — and clear ergonomic solutions.

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10 RED FLAGS — WHEN TO SEEK CLINICAL ASSESSMENT

Condition	Likely cause and ergonomic fix
Headaches	Often driven by upper cervical tension or eye strain from poor screen height. Regular posture resets, monitor repositioning, and chin tuck exercises are typically effective. Varifocal lenses may be a contributing factor.
Upper back stiffness	Caused by rounded shoulders and prolonged static flexion posture. The Brugger reset and shoulder blade retraction exercises are the primary intervention. Review keyboard position and screen height.
Low back pain	Usually from poor lumbar support, chair height mismatch, or anterior pelvic tilt. Ensure the chair back meets the lumbar spine at the correct level. Check seat tilt and ensure feet are fully supported.
Restless legs	Frequently linked to poor chair height with legs hanging unsupported. A footrest and regular movement breaks typically resolve this. Check chair height carefully before other interventions.
Tingling in hands	May indicate carpal tunnel syndrome or thoracic outlet compression. Wrist position, shoulder posture, and keyboard placement are frequently the cause. If persistent beyond two weeks, clinical assessment is warranted.
Pain on standing	After prolonged sitting, hip flexors and gluteal muscles inhibit. Gentle hip flexor stretches before standing, and sit-to-stand transitions integrated throughout the day, prevent this from becoming habitual.

Workstation adjustments and self-management resolve the vast majority of desk-related complaints. However, the following symptoms warrant professional clinical assessment. Do not wait for these to resolve on their own.

! Pain that persists for more than 2–3 weeks despite workstation adjustments and self-management

! Symptoms that wake you at night or prevent you from finding a comfortable sleeping position

! Tingling, numbness, or weakness in the arms, hands, or fingers

! Pain that radiates from the neck into the shoulder, arm, or hand

! Headaches that are frequent, progressively worsening, or accompanied by any visual disturbance