

Preventing Low Back Pain in the Office Worker

It's no doubt sitting at your desk for long periods of time can start to take its toll on your body. Many of the patients in our clinic develop low back pain because of the demands of their job which is done from a desk. This starts because of many different factors, which we will outline soon. The unfortunate reality that we see is that it is much more than just low back pain while working, it effects their hobbies, social life, and overall lifestyle.

Let's take Bill's story for example. Bill is a financial analyst and because of his consistency and skill, he provides great value for his company. In his spare time, he enjoys cycling and teaching his 7 year-old daughter how to play soccer in the yard. Bill has been working at a desk for 15 years now and has been with his current company for about 12 years. His typical work week now includes a hybrid schedule where he goes into the office 3 days a week and gets to stay at home and work 2 days a week.

His typically workday is from 8:30 to 5:30 with a 1-hour round trip commute 3 days a week. Over the past 2 months, he started to notice his low back aching occasionally. It was very sporadic and did not affect his work or hobbies, so he did not think much of it.

He recently completed the biggest project that he has had in his 12 years with this company. The project lasted about 3 weeks and during this time Bill had to work about 6-7 hours extra each week and was much more focused during his working hours to make sure it was completed on time and done well. He had to cut out cycling to spend extra time on the project and still see his family some each day. Though it was very stressful for him, the project was a success and Bill's hard work paid off.

Unfortunately, he started to notice during the project that his low back pain was now consistently there. He did not have time to worry about it during the project and assumed it would go away eventually. However, weeks after the project has been completed, his low back pain is still getting a little worse every day. It starts off as a dull ache and stiffness in the morning and then by the end of the workday and during his drive home, it is the main thing he is thinking about.

He was excited to get back into cycling after his project was completed, but he hasn't been able to ride his bike for more than 10 minutes without the pain becoming too much to bear, forcing him to give up this hobby. Though he stills finds time to see his family each night, his increasing pain has kept him from being able to teach his daughter how to kick and dribble a soccer ball.

He feels like the pain is starting to go down his right leg in addition to the low back pain. Bill is frustrated that his hard work for his company has now resulted in constant back and leg pain that is affecting his work habits, his exercise routine, and his relationship with his growing daughter.

This Does Not Have to be Your Story!

We see stories like Bill's all the time! It can be tough to see that what starts as a minor ache at work can grow into a pain so severe that it negatively impacts all aspects of his life. However, the story does not end here! We have had excellent success helping patients just like Bill erase the pain-riddled story that began to define their life.

We started the process by sitting down with Bill and listening to his story. Then we performed a thorough evaluation which helps us target our treatment. After Bill consented to treatment, we set out to quickly get rid of his low back pain and provide him with the tools he needed to keep his low back strong and mobile while working his job.

Because of our success with treatment in office workers like Bill, we thought it would be beneficial to make a guide for desk workers to help prevent low back pain in the first place! This way, you don't have to go through the pain and trouble that Bill suffered from, all because of his desk job!

Office Workers and Low Back Pain

If we're going to discuss how office workers can help prevent themselves from getting low back pain, it is important to know what factors about being an office worker puts you at risk for low back pain. After this is discussed, it will help make preventing low back pain a little bit easier to understand.

Certain risk factors for low back pain that apply to the entire population are also in-play for office workers. Some of these include smoking, poor sleep schedules, high levels of stress, and poor mobility.

There are also low back pain risk factors that are more specific for office workers. These include at least 10 years of being an office worker, sitting for over half your workday, standing for over 2 hours continuously, having a chair with minimal support, poor workstation ergonomics, heavy computer usage, weak back and core muscles, frequently bending forward, and job dissatisfaction.

As you see, there are many different factors in when it comes to low back pain and although many are physical factors, there are also physiological and psychological factors at hand as well. Because of this, the best low back pain treatment and prevention for office workers is a multi-modal approach which includes having adequate back strength and mobility, good workstation ergonomics, proper nutrition through an anti-inflammatory diet, managing your stress, and having a consistent sleep schedule that gets you at least 7 hours of sleep nightly.

Preventing Low Back Pain for Office Workers

Though an integrative approach that covers physical, physiological, and psychological factors is best for preventing low back pain in office workers, here we will dive more into the physical factors. The physical factors are much easier to control and quickly implement changes into

your work schedule that will benefit your back health. Here we will go into some depth about workstation posture and then discuss the importance of micro-breaks while showing you some simple exercises to do at your desk throughout the day.

Forget Everything You Know About Posture

Let's debunk a couple myths really quick: sitting is not the new smoking (as most people say) and the best workstation posture is not having your chest up and shoulders back. You may think this is crazy! But hear me out.

First of all, sitting all day is not good for you, but most people automatically want to replace it with standing. Standing might be a little bit better for your low back health than sitting, but not by much. The previously mentioned research showed that standing for long periods of time is still a risk factor for office workers developing low back pain.

Second, sitting with your chest up and shoulders back is a good posture to be in, but not the best. The best posture is a moving posture – one that does not stay in the same place for very long. When you stay in the same posture for long periods of time, your muscles, ligaments, and tendons start to get used to that position and adapt to it – this is not a good thing! This is what can cause tightness, stiffness and possibly even pain over time.

We recommend people change their posture every 10-15 minutes. We don't mean a huge change in posture either; simply move your back, head, shoulders, and feet into slightly different positions than they were in for the last 15 minutes.

We love when our patients have standing desks as this is a great way to change your posture throughout the day. However, most office workers don't know how to properly use them. Many people end up standing for long periods of time with the standing desk. We recommend not standing in place for longer than 30 minutes. And during these 30 minutes, you should not be in the same posture. Remember, the best posture to be in is a posture that doesn't stay in the same place very long.

Micro-Breaks

Along with frequent changes in posture, you should get away from your desk at least once an hour and move around for 5 minutes. This can be going to the restroom, going to talk a colleague, or doing the exercises we show below. Micro-breaks are important to work our joints and muscles through different ranges of motion and this stimulates blood flow, which is the only way our joints receive nutrients.

Below we show you 3 simple exercises that you can do at your office desk that are designed to increase the mobility and stability in your back muscles.

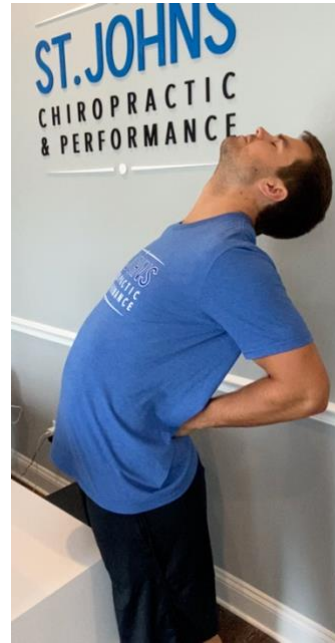
Exercise

Starting Position

Movement

Instructions

Low Back
Extensions



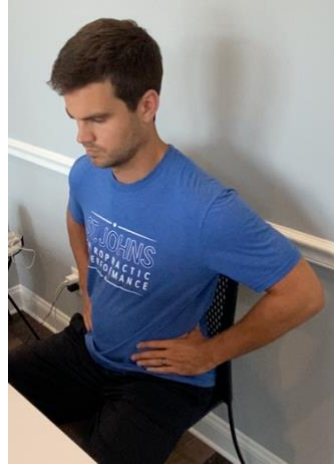
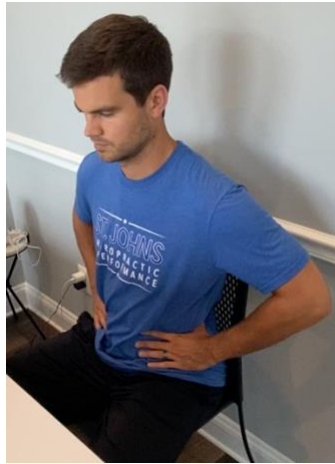
- Start standing with both fists on both sides of your low back
- Then press forward on your low back as you extend your body backwards
- Hold this for 1 second & complete 10 repetitions

Mid Back
Extensions



- Start by leaning your elbows up against a raised surface
- Then sink your back towards the floor
- Hold this for 1 second & complete 10 repetitions

Pelvic Breathing



- Start hands right above your pelvic bone
- Then press your fingers away with each breath by trying to “breathe into your pelvis”
- Do this for 30 seconds

We recommend completing this routine 4 times throughout the workday while also changing postures every 15 minutes and taking additional micro-breaks every hour. Remember that nutrition, sleep, ergonomics, and stress can all play big roles in prevention as well and it is important to cover those bases.

If you are an officer worker who has low back pain, you likely will need more guidance and therapy than just doing these exercises 4 times during the work day. It is always best to get low back pain examined by a medical professional, who has a good track record with low back pain. This professional can give you guidance on how to work pain-free, so that it doesn't effect other areas of your life!

If you have additional questions about this guide or the exercises done, please call 904-217-7078 or email Grant@STJchiro.com.

Low Back Pain Statistics from:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3036671/pdf/1471-2474-12-23.pdf>