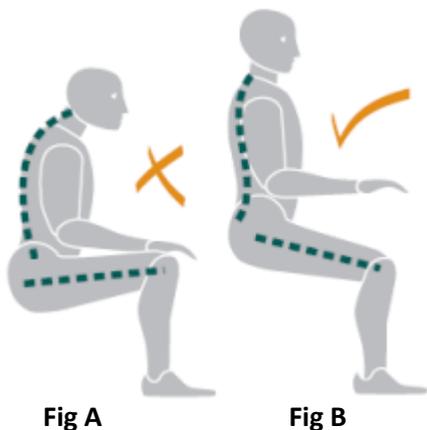


How to sit correctly at your desk

We are not designed to sit. Yet, if we look at the average person's day we see that the majority of our time is spent sitting. The average person in Joburg might spend an hour sitting in their cars in traffic, get to work, spend another 8 hours sitting at their desks before making the hour trip back home where they'll relax after a hard day at the office, spending the evening sitting on the couch at home.

When sitting there is 40% more pressure through your lower back discs compared to when you are standing. Sitting and bending forward doubles this pressure. It is therefore important to sit in a way that will allow your spine and muscles to be in a position where they are in the least amount of stress possible.



With correct sitting (Figure B) you can see your spine naturally has an S-shaped curve. In this position the pressure through your lower back is minimised.

In a slouch posture (Figure A), which is all too familiar, the shape of the spine changes to a C-shaped curve. You will also notice your shoulders and neck push forward. In this position the pressure through your lower back is higher and the forward position of the upper body can cause neck pain, shoulder pain and headaches. Pain between your shoulder blades is also a result of this position.

The difficulty is, if I asked you to sit up correctly for your 8 hour sitting day, your postural muscles would fatigue and you would end up slouching. The solution is your chair and ergonomics (how everything in your environment fits with you.)

Here are the golden rules:

- 1. Sit as far back in your chair as possible.** This will allow your lower back to make contact with your back rest and prevent you from slouching. If the back rest is set too far back for you to be able to reach your workstation without leaning your upper body away from the backrest, bring the back rest forward.
- 2. Pull your chair into your desk.** If you are sitting too far away from your desk you will automatically lean forward again or perch at the end of your chair to get close to your work. A common problem is armrests getting in the way, stopping you from getting close enough. Some chairs have adjustable armrests for this reason. Otherwise drop your chair down till it can just fit under or pull your keyboard and mouse closer to you on the desk to minimise the distance you need to reach (see point 4).
- 3. Make sure you're sitting at the right height.** The right height on your chair is when your forearms can comfortably rest on the desk (or armrests). The text books talk about a 90° angle at the elbows. Most people sit with their chairs too low. If you're feeling tension in your neck try lifting your chair slightly. For some this might mean your feet come off the ground. If this is the case getting a footrest or box under your feet should do the trick.

- 4. The things you use most often should be closest to you.** Usually this means your keyboard and mouse. Make sure these are both a comfortable distance away while you are sitting back in your chair. If they are too far away from you, you'll want to lean forward in your chair or reach a long way with your arms. Both will cause upper back, shoulder and neck pain. Make sure your mouse is not too far out to the side, it should be just next to your keyboard.
- 5. Your phone should be on your non-dominant side.** A nasty habit is for people to pick up the phone and tuck it into their necks to leave their hands free. This puts enormous stress on your neck and shoulders. You may think you're doing it for 5 minutes, but if you have 10 such calls in the day, that's 50 minutes of a very bad posture. Try moving the phone to your non-dominant side. For example, if I'm right handed the phone should be on my left, so I will tend to pick it up with my left and leave my right hand to make notes and use the mouse etc.
- 6. Monitors should be at eye-level.** If your monitor is too low, you'll bend forward to get a good look. Using yellow pages or paper reams under the monitor will help raise it. A monitor that's too high (this usually happens if it's placed on top of the hard drive) means you'll be looking up the entire day. This can result in neck pain and headaches at the back of the head. Put it flat on the table and use yellow pages if necessary.
- 7. Everything should be directly in front of you.** If your keyboard is in front of you and your monitor is to the side, the twisting action of your neck and/or back can cause pain in your neck, shoulders, upper back and lower back.
- 8. Using laptops.** The problem with laptops is that they're all-in-one and the screens are too low. Ideally you should use a separate mouse and keyboard with the laptop on a monitor stand. If that's not possible there are many laptop tilts that raise the monitor while still allowing you to use the keyboard.

Don't put your headaches and neck tension down to stress. Following these golden rules and making small changes to the way you sit can make significant differences to the way you feel at the end of the day.

For more questions about the correct sitting posture and ergonomics contact jeanne@fourwaysbio.co.za

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