

# Computer Corner

## Improving and Maintaining Health in the Office

**A**t this time of year, I often think of a line from a poem I wrote for a customer who lost her husband... "Always planning, always growing, for that's what gardeners do, Looking forward to the season of planting, and the harvest too".

I think anyone who cares about the tasks they undertake in life would relate, whether they're gardeners or not. As we enter the holiday season, I think of how thankful I am for our harvest of accomplishments from the year past. And, I find myself planning for the year to come.

Computer Corner articles often give instructions for maintaining the "good health" of computer hardware or data. In this season of Thanksgiving, it seems to me, that perhaps we should also consider the most important assets in the office – the people who work there!

### Hazards of Sedentary Work

My husband's grandparents were farmers. When they would hear us comment on being exhausted at the end of a long work day, they'd look befuddled and ask how we could be so tired just sitting for hours.

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cholesterol levels, back pain, leg pain and more. A long day at the office can leave a body racked with pain.

### Prevention suggestions...

- **Go Ergonomic:** Not everyone's cup of tea, I have to admit. Some of the ergonomic seating, or sit-to-stand options, strike me more like instruments of torture. While many aid in good at-the-desk posture, the ones that cause the user to teeter around struggling to stay balanced may provide some physical fitness but seem to fit better into the category of playground equipment. It's important to "Try Before you Buy".

There are also ergonomic mouse pads, keyboards, under-desk/chair mats and more. Some items are pricey. But, there are also products that may improve the comfort and performance of existing office furniture for little money. One might improve the comfort of an office chair with inexpensive items like a mesh backrest or soft padded armrest covers.

- **Under-desk exercise:** There's an entire industry dedicated to exercise equipment one can use while working at a desk and their price range is as varied as the sorts of devices available. Of course, there's nothing stopping any of us from just doing some toe tapping and moving around of legs and feet while typing away at our keyboards.
- **Massage:** Personally my favorite piece of office furniture is a Shiatsu massage desk chair. If such an extravagance is not in the budget, there are also more affordable massage seat cushions.
- **Rest Breaks:** Walk around, maybe even around the block or up and down the stairs. Get the body moving and the blood flowing.
- We've recently learned of a new, little-known remedy for 'desk fatigue' and many other complaints. I call it the "Fountain of Youth" discovery, but we will save that as the article's big Finale.

Monitor Eye strain 'Computer Vision Syndrome' (CVS) – The average American worker spends seven hours a day on the computer either in the office or working from home. CVS symptoms can be eyestrain, headaches, blurred vision, dry eyes, neck and shoulder pain.

### Prevention suggestions...

- **New Monitor:** If a worker struggles trying to read the text on the screen, often an application will allow for changes in text size. If it's time for a new, larger monitor, one with a 'Blue Light' filter and a curved screen that will reduce glare is best. 'Blue Light' is linked to blurred vision, dry eyes, macular degeneration, cataracts and can even cause significant sleep issues.
- **Lighting/Glare:** Not everyone has a curved monitor, so cutting down on glare may make screen positioning an important issue. Window blinds or drapes may be needed, as well as, replacing lighting fixtures with lower-wattage bulbs.
- **Screen Position:** Most people are comfortable viewing a screen looking downward. Optimally, the screen should be 15 to 20 degrees below eye level (about 4 or 5 inches) as measured from the center of the screen and 20 to 28 inches from the eyes. Bifocal wearers may not realize that they ache at the end of the day due to craning their necks to read from a screen set too high.
- **Reference Materials:** When a clerk is transcribing meter readings or looking at checks while entering payments, ideally these materials should be located above the keyboard and below the monitor. The goal is to position documents so the head doesn't need to be re-positioned from the document to the screen.



- **Seating position:** Chairs should be comfortably padded, but not over-padded, and conform to the body. Adjust chair height so feet rest flat on the floor. Adjust arms to support typing; wrists shouldn't rest on the keyboard. Just as a monitor position can reduce neck and back pain, a good chair position can help the eyes but also reduce body pain.
- **Blinking:** Sometimes simple things can make a difference. Minimize chances of developing dry eye staring at a screen by blinking frequently to keep the eye's front surface moist.
- **Medical Care:** Most importantly, have regular eye exams and discuss issues of concern.
- **Rest Breaks:** When possible use breaks to look out a window or at something that lets the eyes refocus on a distant view. The 20-20-20 rule is every 20 minutes, view something 20 feet away for 20 seconds. That may be a bit too idealistic for a real-world workday, but a little rest and change of pace as often as is practical couldn't hurt.

**Carpal tunnel syndrome is caused by pressure on the median nerve:** There are many things that can create or exacerbate this painful and debilitating condition. For those at a computer all day, prolonged repetitive flexing of the wrist, related to mouse use more than the keyboard, can contribute to this problem. This one creeps up on me, especially when I'm using the mouse to create cartoons for the magazine or art for business advertising.

- **Pressure:** Reduce force and relax grip.
- **Consider form:** Avoid bending the wrist all the way down, a relaxed middle position is best. Keep the keyboard at elbow height or slightly lower.

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- The right mouse: Use a mouse that feels comfortable and doesn't strain the wrist.
- Warmth: Avoid stiffness and pain by turning up the thermostat or use a safe space heater or, even fingerless gloves (That's what I do, they worked for Bob Cratchit).
- Rest Breaks: Take breaks or do other tasks to rest the wrist.

### Cell Phone Elbow (also applies to landlines)

Holding a phone, and keeping the elbow bent can choke blood supply to the nerves, causing damage. For me, that nerve pain showed itself by making the pinky finger and half of my ring finger tingle as though they had fallen asleep.

#### Prevention suggestions...

- Headset: For years I resisted using a headset for the many hours I spent providing software technical support over a landline because I didn't want to be tethered to the desk. I didn't want to live that scene out of the film 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding' where the leading lady gets up from her desk forgetting she's wearing a headset and clotheslines herself, ending up in a heap on the floor.
- Wireless Headset: There's wireless for those concerned about being tethered, though, for me, I like to keep wireless devices and the radiation that comes with them to a minimum. I decided to wear a headset, and while I still feel the tingle, the damage stopped there. And, the good news, I have yet to clothesline myself!
- Speaker option: Most landlines have a speaker option, though its use may not be practical at times for reasons of privacy, confidentiality or just office noise. Using a speaker with a cell phone may also protect from unseen EMF danger.

EMF from WiFi - Some 'possible threats to health in the modern technological office are more controversial than others. In 2021 the Environmental Health Trust (EHT), a think tank that promotes a healthier environment through research, education, and policy, won their lawsuit against the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The court found, among other charges, that the FCC ignored numerous organizations, scientists and medical doctors who called on them to update limits.

#### Prevention suggestions...

- We may not know for years how big a concern this is. But, for now, perhaps it's wise to err on the side of caution. Adopt safer use habits like using the speaker when possible and don't carry a cell phone in the breast pocket. WiFi is everywhere, but when there's a choice to reduce exposure, it may not be a bad idea.

### The Finale

Now for that new, little-known "Fountain of Youth" discovery mentioned earlier. This started with my husband telling me to work with my bare feet on a mat he put under my desk. He also put one on the bed and plugged it into an electrical outlet ground. When he held an electrical grounding tester against my skin it lit up. He told me that he had been reading about how healthful this 'Grounding' also known as 'Earthing' can be. It sounded like New Age nonsense to me, but I went along.

I started my husband's crazy experiment just a little over a week before my scheduled physical exam. I was concerned I would not get my usual clean bill of health and would probably walk away with a fist full of prescriptions, as I had a list of four health concerns I wanted to discuss with the doctor. The first was self-diagnosed acid reflux. I was popping a lot of antacids. The second was the beginnings of arthritis so painful it was keeping me up even with a powerful pain pill each night. Third, self-diagnosed circulation problems from working at a desk all day. And Finally, charley horse pain that would send me leaping from bed in the night screaming in pain, probably also related to poor circulation and therefore cold legs.

But here's the thing: I threw the list away by the time I went to my appointment, less than two weeks after I started grounding. All my complaints had vanished. No more pain, no more discomfort, and, I was sleeping wonderfully, with lots of vivid dreaming and waking up feeling like a teenager. Now, my days and nights are pain-free and energetic, accomplishing twice each day what I was getting done before.

I've since learned a great deal about the science behind why we're both feeling so well. I share this with my customers and have heard from several that they have had a similar experience. I try to suggest to most folks I speak with to watch the film 'The Earthing Movie', free on YouTube, Roku, Vimeo and lots of other places. One can ground naturally or, if time and circumstances or weather don't permit, there are products available to bring earthing from the backyard into the home and the office. I now consider my little earthing mat under my desk the best piece of office equipment we ever purchased.

So please check it out! There's nothing to lose to learn about something new and so much to gain. Happy Thanksgiving.

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*Linda Windler and her husband Merle are owners of Thoroughbred Systems, Inc., Topeka. The company specializes in utility billing for cities and rural districts, computer networking and associated training. Contact: lindawindler@yahoo.com*





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