

Keep pain at bay

Preventing back pain is as much in the mind as it is the body, writes **Emily Webb**

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Chronic postural strain is a major issue for many health professionals including optometrists, according to South Australian chiropractor Brad Wilson. Ergonomics is broadly defined as design factors intended to maximise productivity by minimising operator fatigue and discomfort. Occupational health and safety and ergonomics are inextricably linked.

'Long sitting times and awkward positioning are sometimes hard to avoid. One has to ensure their body is up to the task,' says Wilson.

'Prevention is the best approach to dealing with any health problem. Having proper equipment is first on the list. Using the best chairs, tables and equipment will ensure positions you have to get into will be aided by good ergonomic support,' he says.

Ergonomics is often associated with posture, equipment and workstation design. Many are not aware that it also includes the cognitive aspects of a task such as mental workload, job skills, stress and organisational aspects of work, says **Jennifer Long**, an optometrist and certified professional ergonomist.

Long specialises in visual ergonomics and says an ergonomist strives to achieve a match between a person's capabilities and the demands of a task and its environment.

'The aim is to increase comfort and job satisfaction, improve productivity and efficiency and reduce injuries,' says Long, who divides her time between private practice as an optometrist, running her own ergonomics consultancy and teaching ergonomics at several universities nationally.

Optometry practices can benefit from an ergonomist's expertise in setting up work areas that are comfortable and safe for both staff and patients. 'They can also assist with work flow and work allocation, which can

increase efficiency and productivity and improve job satisfaction,' Long says.

'For the past seven years I have taught ergonomics to undergraduate optometry students at UNSW. One of their activities is to critically evaluate a piece of ophthalmic equipment from an ergonomics and health and safety perspective. Many of these students will purchase expensive equipment in the future and they need to choose wisely, not only from a financial perspective, but

An ergonomist can assist with work flow and work allocation, which can increase efficiency and productivity and improve job satisfaction [Jennifer Long]

from the perspective of working injury free.'

Taking regular breaks is an important way to take care of health at work, Wilson says. 'Even a few minutes of standing upright or taking a walk every 30 minutes will reduce stress on spinal and connective tissue,' he says.

'Exercise is major contributing factor to preventing injury, and yoga and pilates are great for increasing postural strength and an excellent way to unwind. Resistance exercise is also extremely beneficial. The stronger your larger muscle groups, the more rest smaller postural muscles will get. This will amount to more energy and once again increased productivity.'

'Like most health professionals, you probably suggest regular check-ups to your patients. Do the same for yourself and seek expert advice on keeping your spine and nervous system healthy. Regular spinal checks and adjustments can prevent minor daily postural problems from becoming injuries that take you away from work.'

Drinking plenty of water is another preventative measure that Wilson recommends to patients. 'Regular hydration is really important. Muscles, intervertebral discs, and connective and nerve tissue mainly contain water. Even minor dehydration will make your body more susceptible to injury.

Everybody knows someone with a bad back, says Felicity Wood, managing director of Bad Backs, a company that specialises

in back and joint pain relief. 'Just mention bad backs in any company and you'll be swamped with endless stories of problems, suspect treatments and a general feeling of frustration,' Wood says.

'More than any other physical condition, with the possible exception of headaches and the common cold, people are seeking information and the path to a cure or at least pain relief.'

Wood has seen



a steady increase in demand for

ergonomic products from people with back and joint pain as well as those interested in preventative measures. 'The most important factor in preventing or treating back problems is being well informed of the opportunities for managing or curing the problem and taking responsibility for lifestyle choices that may influence your health,' Wood says.

In addition to providing research and information on its website, Bad Backs has established an outlet for chronic back pain sufferers with its discussion forum relating to pain management.

'Many of the treatments we receive today still deal only with the symptoms, not the cause, Wood says. 'Nonetheless, there's every reason to be more optimistic about therapies, treatments and products available based on continuing medical research.' ■