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Your Job Is Ruining Your Body: Physical Symptoms of Stress at Work

When a recent study found that sitting all day shortens women's lives, we gasped in our cubicles, leapt to our feet, and then...sat back down. But there's good news: You can undo the damage and the physical symptoms of stress, whether you spend your days stuck at a desk or chasing kids around.

By Amy Levin-Epstein



office full of cubicles

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We've all muttered, "Ugh, this job is killing me!" at some point or other. But listening to Lori Bizzoco, 42, a public relations executive in Oceanside, NY, you'd think her job was, literally, a machete-wielding maniac. "I couldn't look down at my BlackBerry for more than five minutes anymore," she says. "It felt like someone had taken a knife and stabbed me in the neck. The

pain ran down my shoulders and all through my back." Lori didn't just ache when she was hunched over her smartphone; it became chronic, and at one point she couldn't get out of bed for a week. Eventually, she abandoned her 15-year career in PR and became a writer instead. The advice she wishes she'd known sooner? That simply by holding your device at eye level, instead of slouching over it the way most of us naturally do, you can relieve some of the pressure on your neck and shoulders.

There are tons of little tweaks like this that could save women in any line of work a whole lot of hurt. And it seems we could use the help now more than ever: "I am not exaggerating when I say that a majority of my patients have job-related ailments — headaches from staring at a computer screen, pain from standing too much, stress from their micromanaging bosses," says Pamela Peeke, M.D., assistant professor of medicine at the University of Maryland Medical School in Baltimore and author of *Body for Life for Women*. "But they usually don't make the connection between their working environment and these health issues until I point them out." Peeke places part of the blame on the still-iffy economy. "People are shortchanging themselves by skipping lunch and snacks, coming in early and/or leaving late for fear of losing their jobs," she says. "I believe chronic stress is epidemic." Whether you spend your days at a desk, behind a checkout counter, running the halls of a hospital, or taking kids from school to soccer to Girl Scouts and back again, this is the work-specific advice you need to protect your health.

DO YOU SIT ALL DAY LONG?

It's official: Sitting too much is bad for you. Not only does it place pressure on the low back and tailbone, causing pain and even sciatic nerve trouble for some women, but two recent studies also found that the more time people spend on their butts each day, the more likely they are to die of cancer or heart disease. The research focused mainly on what people did after work hours — but those of us who sit on the job need to take note too, urges American Cancer Society epidemiologist Alpa Patel, Ph.D., who was the lead author of one of the studies. "Being seated is the most passive thing a woman can do, aside from lying down," she explains. "So the more time spent that way, the less energy you're expending, and the more likely a woman is to die early."

How to stay healthy: The way to ward off both back strain and the scarier, more serious health effects of sitting is fairly simple. "For five minutes every hour, get up and do something — I tell my patients to set an alarm or put it on their calendars," Peeke says. A trip to the bathroom or the watercooler works, but the more active you can be, the better: "Tell people you're going on break, then head to the staircase and go up and down a couple flights. Or go take a lap or two around the building." If low-back pain is an issue for you, add in some stretches too, at least once every couple of hours, says Marni Hillinger, M.D., a physiatry resident at New York Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. An easy one she loves is the leg cross — just prop the ankle of one leg on the knee of your other, bend over and hold for several seconds, then switch sides. One last note for the desk-bound: If you spend all day sitting, try not to do the same all night. "TV-watching has been linked to everything from excess snacking to diabetes and heart disease," says Patel. The more active you can be during your off hours, the better it will be for your health.

DO YOU TAKE CARE OF KIDS?

Congratulations on the calories you're burning! With all the carrying and stroller-pushing, moms of young kids often have strong legs and practically ripped arms. But many of them

also end up with soreness and tightness of the low back and shoulders, what should be called "mommy back." Momhood can be so hard on your body, in fact, that there's a whole group of medical experts who specialize in it: pre- and postpartum physical therapists.

How to stay healthy: First, advice for women with younger kids. Lift with the legs when you pick up your child, like how you'd lift anything else that's heavy, especially if he's all the way down on the ground, says physical therapist Marianne Ryan, clinical director of Manhattan PT in New York City. And if you're tall, get stroller-handle extenders. "When you're using a stroller correctly, your arms should be bent at a 90- to 100-degree angle," she says. Mothers of older children may be hunching over a steering wheel rather than a stroller, so while you're ferrying your kids around, try placing a rolled-up towel at the small of your back. It will encourage you to sit up straight and use your core muscles, reducing tension in your back.

DO YOU TYPE CONSTANTLY?

Spending 20 or more hours a week in front of a computer can put someone at risk of wrist injuries. Livia Blackburne, a graduate student in Cambridge, MA, often clocks 14 hours in one day. "I'm at the lab working on the computer about 40 hours a week, and I am also writing a book," she says. "So I'm at the keyboard all day and up typing all night." At just 28 years old, Livia has already had pain in her wrists and forearms for seven years. "I'm currently in the middle of a flare-up and it's just shooting pains and aching all around the elbow," she says. For now, she's working around the issue by using voice-recognition software for some of her work. "That way I can just talk into my computer mic and don't have to type all of the time," she says. Physical therapy, wearing a wrist splint, or getting steroid injections may help relieve the pain of repetitive motion injuries for some women, says David Rempel, M.D., an occupational medicine doctor at the University of California, San Francisco. But often the damage is severe enough that surgery is the only real cure, he says. That's why prevention is so crucial.

How to stay healthy: "When you're typing, keep your wrists in a neutral position," says John Lloyd, Ph.D., a certified ergonomist in South Florida — never rest them on your desk or hold them up too high. "Ideally, your forearms should be supported on armrests." Taking frequent breaks from your keyboard, at least a few minutes each hour, will help too. "The strain is cumulative. So if you have the option of calling someone instead of emailing them at work, do it," he says. Women may want to be especially careful to take breaks during the week of their period. "During 'that time of the month,' your body retains water, including in the arms and wrists, which increases pressure on the nerves," Lloyd says. (Who knew?)

DO YOU WORK NIGHTS?

Some of the scariest job-related research out there is reserved for people who work while the rest of us are asleep. One major study found that night-shift nurses were more likely to end up getting breast cancer than those who worked during the day, and other new research found that night-shifters are more likely to have irritable bowel syndrome. Sleep disruption is the main culprit, researchers say, but eating habits may play a role too. "I would be up all night running around, have no time to eat, and would just grab fast food on my way home," says Olga Marrero, R.N., who spent six years working nights in the neonatal intensive care unit at a Chicago hospital. "I lost 25 pounds when I switched over to the day shift, and I don't take medication for my stomach anymore."

How to stay healthy: Set a sleep schedule that will give you a solid seven or eight hours of shut-eye a day, and stick to it — even on the weekends if you can, says Joseph Cilona, Psy.D., a psychologist in New York City. It's not easy to sleep when it's light outside and your body naturally wants to be awake, so the National Sleep Foundation suggests wearing wraparound sunglasses on your commute home to minimize exposure to light. "Once you get home, decrease room temperature in the bedroom, pull down the shades, and use earplugs to block out interruptions," Cilona says. Napping during part of your "lunch" hour is another great idea if you can swing it. "Research has found that napping for about an hour can significantly cut back on detrimental effects of shift work, especially if you do it between midnight and early morning," he adds. And *never* skimp on sleep on your days off, says Cilona; you've got to catch up however you can!

DO YOU STAND FOR HOURS ON END?

On the positive side, your job is more active than someone who's stuck at a desk, so you've got some built-in protection against heart disease and obesity. That said, anyone who's ever walked around an amusement park or museum for a day knows that after several hours on your feet, your legs just *hurt*. Women who stand for more than eight hours a day also have significantly higher rates of varicose veins than those who are on their feet less, research has found. "My varicose veins go all the way up to my thighs," says Amy Cox, 34, who waitresses and bartends in Philadelphia. "Also, during a long shift, my feet just ache and my ankles get swollen. I'll lean on something or sit whenever I can."

How to stay healthy: It seems counterintuitive, but after a long day of putting pressure on your legs and feet, the smartest thing to do is move them. "Sitting with your legs up can relieve engorged veins and soreness temporarily, but increasing circulation by moving around is the best thing," says Andrew Kwak, M.D., a varicose-vein expert in Bryn Mawr, PA. Fifteen minutes of brisk walking a day will soothe leg fatigue and reduce swelling, he says. Wearing compression or "support" stockings can also help. (Sure, they're ugly, but no one can see them under your work pants!)

ARE YOU SUPER-STRESSED?

Most of us have some degree of stress in our lives and at our jobs, and that's fine — even exhilarating. Where things get ugly is if the pressure becomes chronic and your body and brain are constantly awash in stress hormones like norepinephrine and cortisol. That can lead to extra belly fat, and increased blood pressure and risk of heart disease, says business psychologist Debra Condren, Ph.D., author of *Ambition Is Not a Dirty Word*. During a particularly rough time last year, Ameer Quiriconi, 38, of Seattle, who owns a small company that manufactures eco-friendly countertops, says the pressure took a hefty toll on her health. "I was more prone to emotional outbursts and anger," she says. "And I couldn't fall asleep. I'd lie in bed for hours. I felt like I couldn't turn off the stress when the day was over; it just multiplied."

How to stay healthy: Is there a magic "pill" for stress? Some experts say yes, and that it's exercise — physical activity can stop the production of cortisol and get rid of tension held in your muscles. Though any kind of physical activity will work, intense cardio like jogging or stair climbing may work best. One study from the University of Missouri in Columbia found

that women who ran for 30 minutes felt less stress and anxiety than those who did something a little easier. What else helps? Support, says Condren, whether it's from a therapist, friends, or even a group of women in the same industry. "I started to see a therapist so I could get things off my chest," says Ameer. "Putting it all out there and asking for help was not something I was accustomed to doing, but it helped."

Condren is also a big proponent of using music for stress relief. "Research shows that listening to music can change our psychological and physiological state in an instant," she says. "It can distract us from focusing on the stress at hand while simultaneously lowering blood pressure and slowing pulse and heart rate." Try listening to Pandora Internet radio at low volume at your desk, or pop in headphones and play the most upbeat song on your iPod.

No matter how you spend your days (or nights) on the job, know that ultimately, you, not the company that signs your paycheck, are in control of your health destiny, says Peeke. "If you think something about your job is making you sick, see your doctor," she says. "The difference it can make in your life — how good you feel now, and even how long you live — is so worth it."

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