

Workplace Wellness



Take a Stand: How Better Ergonomics Can Boost Your Dental Hygiene Career

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We've all heard the saying, "Sitting is the new smoking," and for oral health professionals, it couldn't be more relevant. Our work demands long hours of sitting, hunching, and leaning over patients, often leading to musculoskeletal pain, especially in the neck, back, and shoulders. It's no surprise that many oral health professionals experience acute and chronic pain throughout their careers.

Research from Cornell University's Department of Ergonomics found that sitting puts up to 90% more pressure on the lower back than standing.¹ While 1 in 4 people in North America experience back pain regularly, oral health professionals are even more at risk.² Studies show that up to 97% of us will suffer from pain at some point in our careers.³ This staggering statistic highlights a pressing issue in the oral health care field. Still, there's good news: we can take proactive steps to reduce our risk of pain and injury by improving ergonomics and posture and incorporating movement into our daily routine.



WHY ERGONOMICS MATTERS

Ergonomics isn't just about finding the right chair or equipment—it's about creating an environment that supports your body's natural alignment and movement. Sitting or standing in poor positions for prolonged periods increases stress on the body, leading to pain, injury, and even burnout. As dental hygienists, we spend hours in static positions, leaning over patients or engaging in repetitive motions with our hands and wrists. Without proper ergonomics, these physical demands can lead to long-term musculoskeletal issues.

One of the most effective ways to combat these issues is to understand how ergonomics works and adjust our workspaces to promote better health. Ergonomic tools and positioning are designed to reduce strain and pressure, making a tangible difference in how you feel at the end of the day.

ERGONOMIC TIPS FOR HEALTHIER POSTURE

Here are some practical and easy-to-implement ergonomic tips to help you upgrade your workspace and improve your posture:

1. **Optimize Your Chair Position:** A well-fitted chair is crucial for maintaining good posture. Your chair should support the natural curves of your spine, with your feet flat on the floor and your hips higher than your knees. Unlike traditional chairs, saddle stools allow your pelvis to tilt slightly forward, which maintains the natural curve of your spine and reduces the risk of lower back pain. Saddle stools are excellent options because they encourage a sit-stand posture, which reduces pressure on your lower back and hips.



2. **Maintain Neutral Posture:** A neutral posture is essential, whether sitting or standing. This means aligning your head with your shoulders, keeping your spine long, and relaxing your shoulders. Avoid leaning forward or twisting your torso. If you catch yourself slouching, take a moment to reset and return to a neutral position. Neutral posture helps your body work more efficiently, using less energy and reducing muscle strain.
3. **Take Microbreaks:** Dental hygiene work requires intense focus and physical exertion, but short, frequent breaks can help reset your posture and reduce tension. Even a quick 30-second stretch or walk around the office can make a difference. Set reminders on your phone or computer to ensure you move throughout the day.
4. **Incorporate Movement:** Our bodies are not designed to remain in static positions for long periods. Incorporating stretches and movement into your day can prevent tightness and improve overall flexibility. Simple stretches, such as seated neck stretches or Cat/Cow, can be done chairside between patients.
5. **Use Ergonomic Tools:** Ergonomic equipment is a game-changer for reducing physical strain. Ergonomic loupes are designed with proper magnification and an ergonomic tilt, which reduces neck and back strain. Coupled with a saddle stool and ergonomic instruments, these tools can transform how you feel after a full day of patient care.

THE BENEFITS OF STANDING

Incorporating standing into your day can also reduce musculoskeletal strain. Alternating between sitting and standing helps balance the workload on your muscles and prevents stiffness. When standing, keep your feet shoulder-width apart, engage your core, and avoid locking your knees for proper posture.

TAKING THE NEXT STEPS

As oral health professionals, we must prioritize our health and well-being to provide the best care possible. By focusing on ergonomics, incorporating movement, and sitting and standing with intention, we can reduce pain, prevent injury, and thrive in our careers. Ergonomics is an ongoing process—whether adjusting your chair, taking more breaks or investing in ergonomic tools, every step brings you closer to a healthier, pain-free future.

References

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