

Choosing a chair

- There are no bad chairs; only chairs ill suited to the individual and the circumstances of use
- Office chairs must meet legal requirements
- A good chair is not a substitute for changing positions and stretching regularly.

Many people hope to prevent back pain by choosing the right chair. While this is indeed important, it is crucial to see choosing the right chair as part of a wider solution, to help prevent and manage back pain.

Chairs should be chosen to suit the individual and the circumstances. There are no bad chairs; there are only chairs ill suited to the individual and the circumstances of use.

Over the past years many chairs have been developed that promote an “active posture”. These chairs allow for small movements of the spine in various directions, which ensures that you use your muscles to stabilise yourself (particularly your back and stomach muscles). Other chairs aim to give you a good posture by providing support in crucial areas such as the lower back. When you stand up and look at yourself from the side in a mirror you can see that your spine follows an S-shape. As a rule of thumb, it would be great if your chair allowed you to roughly maintain that natural S shape of your spine.

When choosing a chair you need to decide on two main things:

- 1) Is the chair comfortable for you?
- 2) Does the chair suit the activities and circumstances that you are planning to use it for?

A good chair should have the following benefits/features:

- When you are seated your thighs should be at right angles to your body or sloping slightly down and there should be a small gap between the front of the seat and the back of your knees. This helps maintain the natural curve in the lower back and supports your thighs while allowing your legs space to move.
- It allows you to have your feet firmly on the ground, in some cases you may need to use a footrest to achieve this. The basic rule is to plant your feet on the floor and support your back.
- It has an adjustable seat and back, both in height and tilt.
- It allows you to do the things you want to do ie reading, writing, computer work etc, without forcing you into awkward postures.

Other factors to consider:

- Does the chair have inbuilt lumbar support, or will you need to consider a portable back support?
- A high backrest can be comfortable but can also restrict your movement especially if you will be doing lots of movement with your shoulders and arms. This is an example of why it is important to decide how you are planning to use the chair.
- If the chair has arm rests they should be low enough for your arms and shoulders to remain relaxed and should not collide with your desk preventing you from sitting close to it.
- Are there legal requirements for the type of chair you use? For example, by law office chairs (those used at workstations) must meet a certain minimum standard. They must be stable - the classic office chair with five legs in a star shape. They must allow the user easy freedom of movement and a comfortable position – meaning that the height must be adjustable and the seat back must also be adjustable, in both height and tilt.
- Ideally the seat back should move independently of the seat to allow for a more comfortable position.

Whatever chair you are using it is important to get up, move around and change position regularly as staying active is a key part of preventing and managing back pain. Do this about every twenty minutes as avoiding spending long periods of time in a single position can prevent much discomfort.

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