

Office ergonomics

Managing your health and wellbeing

Practical tools and techniques to help you lead a fulfilling life

Important Information

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Introduction

In the modern office environment, computers allow us to work faster and more efficiently, often requiring less physical activity and social interaction with others. This can increase the potential for poor physical and mental health to develop.

This booklet has been developed as a guide to assist you to look after your mind and body, through the prevention of musculoskeletal pain and management of stress.

The information provided can be applied both at work and at home. It contains some tips for setting up your workstation, arranging and managing workday tasks, posture awareness and office stretches, eating healthy and managing stress.

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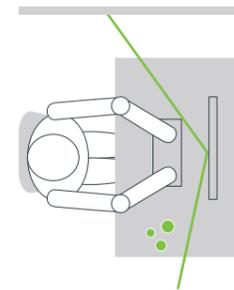
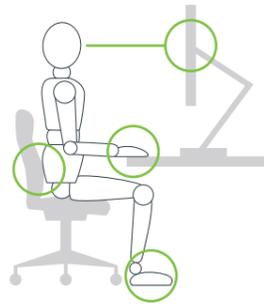
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Workstation design

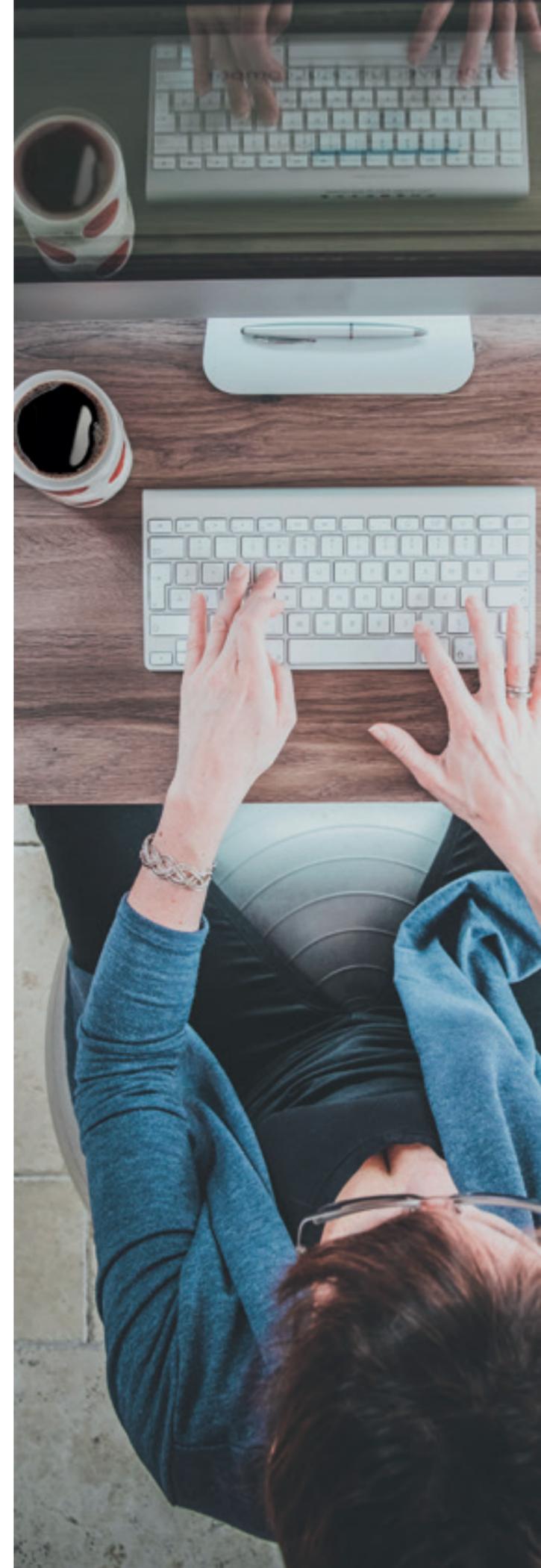
If you work in an office you probably spend most of your day sitting behind a desk. Prolonged sitting is a risk factor for developing back and other musculoskeletal related pain.¹



'Good ergonomics' refers to the way your work environment is set up, and the way your work tasks are arranged each day. Your work environment and the way in which you organise your workspace can help prevent and manage musculoskeletal related pain at work.² Here are some tips on how to adjust your chair and set up your workstation:

- 1 Support your back and rest your feet on the floor**
Adjust your chair with the back rest upright so your lower back is properly supported to reduce the strain on your back. The chair height should enable you to use the keyboard with your wrists and forearms straight and level with the floor. This can help prevent overuse injuries. Place your feet flat on the floor. If your feet are not on the floor, request a footrest which lets you rest your feet at a level that's comfortable. Crossing your legs whilst sitting may contribute to posture-related problems.
- 2 Place your screen at eye level**
Your screen should be directly in front of you. If the screen is too high or too low, you'll have to bend your neck, which can cause discomfort. If you reach out in front of you, you should be just able to touch your screen with your fingertips. This ensures it is not too close or too far away.
- 3 Place your keyboard in front of you when typing**
Leave a gap of about four to six inches (100–150mm) at the front of the desk. This allows you to rest your wrists between bouts of typing. Keep your arms bent in an L-shape and your elbows by your sides. A wrist rest can be used to keep wrists straight and at the same level as the keys. Do not place any papers between you and your keyboard. Use a document holder.

- 4 Avoid screen reflection**
Your screen should be as glare-free as possible. Place the screen so that it does not face windows, catch reflections from windows, or have a window directly behind it causing glare. Adjusting the screen's brightness or contrast can make it easier to use.
- 5 Make objects accessible**
Position frequently used objects, such as your telephone or stapler, within easy reach. Avoid repeatedly stretching or twisting to reach things. Position and use the mouse as close to you as possible. A mouse mat with a wrist pad may help keep your wrist straight and avoid awkward bending.
- 6 Avoid phone strain**
If you spend a lot of time on the phone, try using a headset instead of a handset. Repeatedly cradling the phone between your ear and shoulder can strain your neck muscles.



WHAT IS 'WORKPLACE ERGONOMICS'?

Ergonomics is a science concerned with the 'fit' between people and their work. It puts people first, taking account of their capabilities and limitations. Ergonomics aims to make sure that tasks, equipment, information and the environment fit each worker.

Applying ergonomics to the workplace can:

- Reduce the potential for accidents
- Reduce the potential for injury and ill health
- Improve performance and productivity.

Posture tips for laptop users

Laptops allow us to be able to work more flexibly, but they have been blamed for causing work-related back, neck and shoulder problems.³

Here are some ways you can make your laptop safer and more comfortable to use:

- 1 Use a separate keyboard and mouse so the laptop can be put on a stand
- 2 Have the screen opened at eye level
- 3 Use your laptop on a stable base (not on your lap), where there is support for your arms
- 4 Take regular breaks
- 5 Adopt good sitting posture with lower back support
- 6 Ensure other desk equipment is within reach.

Arranging work tasks for good ergonomics

- 1 Take regular 1–2 minute breaks every 30 minutes
- 2 Have lunch away from your desk – use the opportunity to get up and move
- 3 Use a standing desk for part of the day
- 4 Arrange your work day so you are not sitting and doing one task for too long
- 5 Avoid eye strain by resting your eyes regularly.

Performing written tasks

- 1 Organise your time so that you are not sitting for long periods in a static posture
- 2 Take regular stretch breaks or alternate writing tasks with other non-sedentary duties
- 3 Consider the pen/pencil you are using e.g. soft lead pencil or free flowing pen, thicker circumference or pen/pencil grips to reduce hand muscle fatigue
- 4 Be aware of your posture – especially your hands, wrists, shoulders and neck
- 5 Ensure your back is well supported at the correct height (as for setting up your workstation)
- 6 All items should be placed within your optimum reach section to avoid over reaching, twisting or turning
- 7 Place your work onto a slope board or an A4 file to bring the work closer to you.

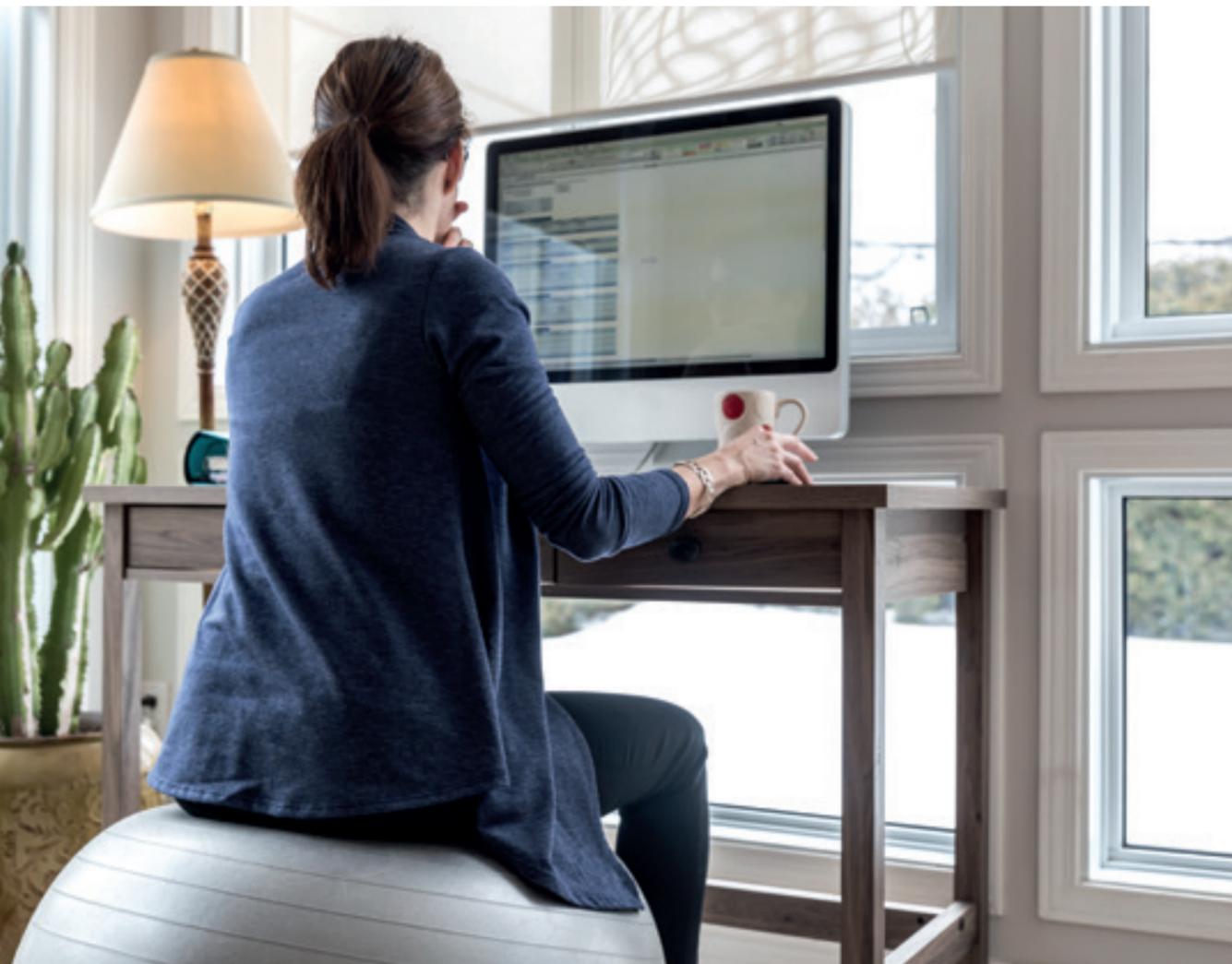
DID YOU KNOW?

Good working positions involve working with the body in a neutral position in which your joints are aligned and supported in their natural position. This reduces the stress and strain on the musculoskeletal system (muscles, ligaments, bones) and may help in the prevention of musculoskeletal aches and pains.



Common postural mistakes and fixes

Any type of prolonged poor posture will, over time, substantially increase the risk of developing musculoskeletal pain.¹ Examples include slouching in your chair, leaning on one leg while standing and hunching over your keyboard.



Slouching in a chair

Slouching doesn't necessarily cause discomfort, but over time this position can place strain on muscles and soft tissues. This strain may increase tension in the muscles, which may in turn cause pain.

Prevent pain from slouching by sitting correctly. A good sitting posture is one in which your spinal curves are maintained and you are sitting well back in the chair, upright but relaxed. Use a support behind your lower back if sitting for long periods and keep hips, knees and ankles are at right angles with knees slightly higher than hips. Avoid sitting for long periods of time without regular posture changes.

It may not feel comfortable initially because your muscles have not been conditioned to support you in the correct position. Exercises to strengthen your core and buttock muscles, and back extensions, will help correct a slouching posture. You can discuss what exercises are best for you with your doctor or physiotherapist.

Leaning on one leg

Leaning more on one leg while standing can feel comfortable, especially if you've been standing for a while. But instead of using your buttocks and core muscles to keep you upright, you place excessive pressure on one side of your lower back and hip.

This may result in the development of muscle imbalances around the pelvis area, which can cause muscular strain in the lower back and buttocks. A good standing posture is one in which your spinal curves are maintained, you look ahead with your chin gently pulled in, your shoulder blades are gently pulled back and down, your stomach and buttock muscles are gently tightened and other muscles are relaxed.

Hunched back and 'text neck'

Hunching over your keyboard could be an indication that you have a tight chest and a weak upper back. Over time, this type of posture can contribute to you developing a rounded upper back, which can cause shoulder and upper back stiffness.

Using a mobile can cause similar problems dubbed "text neck". Upper back, neck and rear shoulder strengthening exercises, chest stretches and neck posture drills can help correct this.

Remember to consult your doctor or physiotherapist before starting any exercise program.

Poking your chin

The poking chin posture can be caused by sitting too low, a screen set too high, a hunched back, or a combination of all three. Correcting a poking chin involves improving your sitting habits and exercises to correct your posture.

- Gently lengthen your neck upwards as you tuck in your chin
- Bring your shoulder blades down and back towards your spine
- Pull in your lower tummy muscles to maintain a natural curve in your lower back
- Adjust your seating.

Exercises for the office

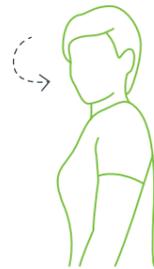
The lack of activity and movement as well as the bad posture associated with sitting in front of a desk all day means our bodies are under a great deal of stress.

Here are some exercises you can do in the office to reduce the impact of bad posture and a lack of movement. Try these exercises after spending periods of time in static positions (i.e. holding, driving, sitting) or after completing repetitive movements (i.e. lifting, collating, marking). Remember to stand up, walk around and stretch regularly.



Stretches should feel comfortable. If you do feel discomfort or pain, discontinue and consult your doctor or physiotherapist.

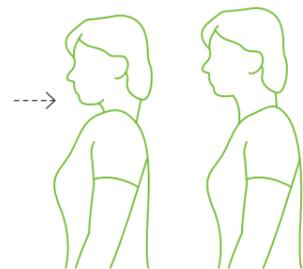
NECK STRETCHES



Sit with good posture. Slowly turn your head one side and then the other.



Sit or stand. Lower your chin to your chest, then return to the starting position.

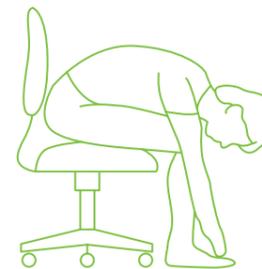


Sit or stand with good posture. Keeping your head level, pull your chin back. Relax, then repeat.

BACK STRETCHES



Lower back stretch
Support lower back with hands and lean backwards while lifting your chest. Relax and return to starting position.

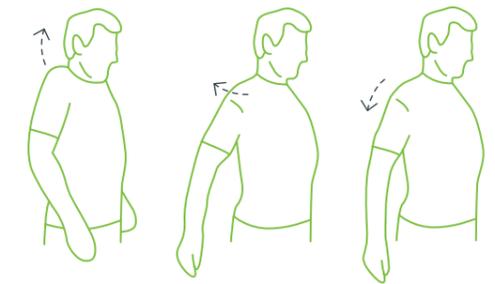


Forward bend
Bend forward and let your head and arms hang over your knees. Relax into the position and hold for a few seconds. Breathe in as you slowly come back up to seated position.



Side stretch
Sit facing forward with feet slightly apart. Raise your arms out to the sides. Bend to the left, reaching toward the floor with your left hand and your right hand pointing toward the ceiling. Hold for a few seconds, then come back to starting position. Repeat with your right side.

SHOULDER STRETCH



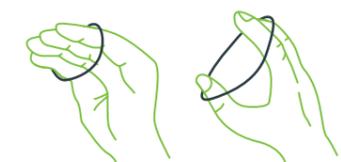
Stand and raise your shoulders. Hold for five seconds. Squeeze your shoulder blades back and together and hold for five seconds. Pull your shoulder blades downward and hold for five seconds. Relax and repeat 10 times.

WRIST STRETCH



Keeping your arm straight in front with your palm facing down, gently bend your wrist down. Use the opposite hand to press the stretching hand back towards your body and hold for 15–30 seconds. Straighten your wrist. Gently bend the stretching hand backwards and use the opposite hand to pull the fingers back. Hold for 15–30 seconds. Do 3 sets with each wrist.

HAND/FINGER EXERCISE



Place an elastic band around all your fingers and your thumb. Stretch the band as far as it will stretch by extending your fingers then release – never hyper-extend your fingers. Repeat 10 times.

Managing aches and pains at work

Many aches and pains can be relieved by changing your working posture or work patterns. The following tips may help to make you more comfortable.

1 Headaches

Common contributing factors: posture, visual problems, noise, stress, glare, workload.

What can you try:

- Rearrange work area
- Screen filter
- Close blinds
- Shut doors
- Vary tasks
- Reduce time on computer
- Eye test.

2 Back and side of the neck

Common contributing factors: looking down at documents or keyboard; looking to one side.

What can you try:

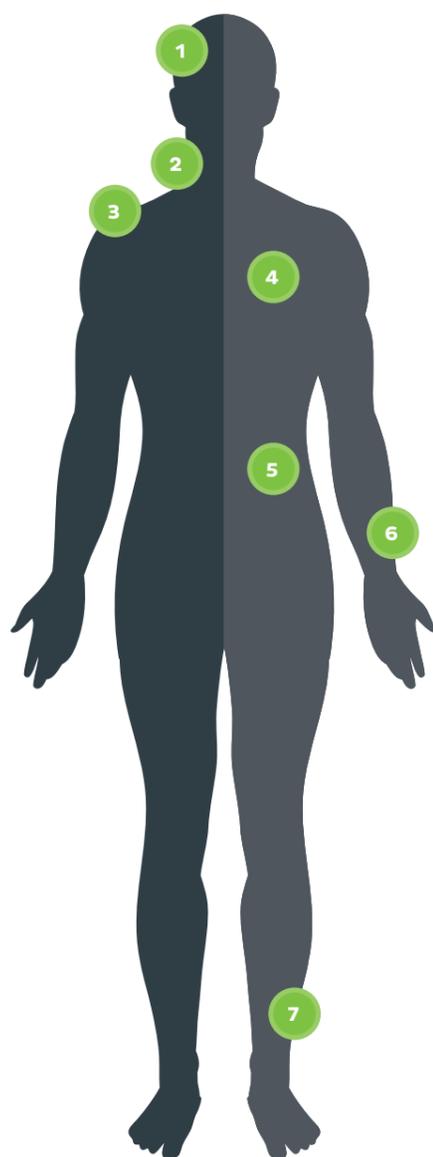
- Use a document holder
- Place documents and screen in front of you
- Improve your keyboard skills
- Adjust monitor height.

3 Top, outside or front of shoulders

Common contributing factors: keyboard too high; arms unsupported.

What can you try:

- Raise your chair
- Use a footrest
- Rest palms on front of desk
- Reduce desk height.



4 Upper back

Common contributing factors: twisted posture.

What can you try:

- Sit straight on
- Place documents, screen and keyboard in front of you.

5 Lower back

Common contributing factors: inadequate lumbar support.

What can you try:

- Adjust backrest height/angle
- Remove arms from chair
- Remove obstructions under desk.

6 Left/right arm

Common contributing factors: outstretched arm without support; reaching for phone.

What can you try:

- Move mouse and/or telephone closer
- Use a headset or speaker phone.

7 Leg discomfort, swollen feet

Common contributing factors: underside of thighs compressed against chair seat.

What can you try:

- Use a footrest
- Reduce desk/chair height.

Healthy eating

The Australian Dietary Guidelines⁴ suggest the following tips that can help to achieve a healthy weight and improve overall health.

Enjoy a wide variety of foods from these five groups every day

- Vegetables, including different types and colours, and legumes/beans
- Fruit
- Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties, such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, polenta, couscous, oats, quinoa and barley
- Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans
- Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or their alternatives, mostly reduced fat (reduced fat milks are not suitable for children under the age of two years).

And drink plenty of water.

Limit saturated fat

Limit foods high in saturated fat such as biscuits, cakes, pastries, pies, processed meats, burgers, pizza, fried foods, potato chips, crisps and other savoury snacks.

Replace high fat foods which contain predominantly saturated fats such as butter, cream, cooking margarine, coconut and palm oil with foods which contain predominantly polyunsaturated and mono-unsaturated fats such as oils, spreads, nut butters/ pastes and avocado.



ASSESSING A HEALTHY WEIGHT

These goals are a general guide. Work with your doctor to set your personal goals.

BODY MASS INDEX (BMI)

How to measure BMI



For example, a 75kg person with a height of 1.75m:



Risk Classification

BMI	Classification	Risk
Less than 18.50	Underweight	Low*
18.50 – 24.99	Normal range	Average
25.00 – 29.99	Overweight/Preobese	Increased
30.00 – 34.99	Obese Class 1	Moderate
35.00 – 39.99	Obese Class 2	Severe
40.0 or greater	Obese Class 3	Very severe

* Risk of other clinical problems increased

Limit added salt

Limit intake of foods and drinks containing added salt.

- Read labels to choose lower sodium options among similar foods
- Do not add salt to foods in cooking or at the table.

Limit added sugars

Limit intake of foods and drinks containing added sugars, such as confectionery, sugar sweetened soft drinks and cordials, fruit drinks, vitamin waters, energy and sports drinks.

Limit alcohol intake

If you choose to drink alcohol, limit intake. For women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breast-feeding, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

Australian guidelines recommend no more than two standard alcoholic drinks per day.

Consult your doctor or a dietitian before changing your diet.



A great way to achieve a healthy and balanced diet is to choose the portions as shown in the plate above, for each meal:

- 3 serves of vegetables and/or salad
- 2 serves of carbohydrate
- 1 serve of protein.

Examples of healthy lunch options



Wholegrain sandwich with ham and salad



Roast vegetable and quinoa salad with nuts and seeds



Prawn rice paper rolls



Beef and vegetable stir fry with rice



Sushi rolls with fish, chicken or vegetables



Chicken breast burritos with salad



Vegetable frittata with salad

Reducing stress

If you're stressed, whether by your job or by something more personal, the first step to feeling better is to identify the cause. Stress can positively or negatively impact your health and wellbeing.

A small amount of stress can be beneficial by challenging, motivating or stimulating you, often leading to greater performance and job satisfaction. However, when stress or pressure becomes too much you may feel that you are unable to cope and become distressed, negatively impacting your ability to work. The following stress buster tips can help you look after your mind and body, and reduce stress and its impact on your health.

- 1 Look after your health**
Focus on healthy eating and getting regular exercise. Take time to do activities you find calming or uplifting, such as listening to music, walking or dancing. Avoid using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to cope.
- 2 Identify warning signs**
Learn to notice the signs in your body that indicate when stress is becoming a problem, such as tensing your jaw, experiencing headaches, irritability and short temper.
- 3 Identify your sources of stress**
These might include late nights, deadlines, relationships, financial worries or changing jobs. Anticipating, managing or even finding ways to remove the source will help reduce stress.
- 4 Establish routines**
Routines such as regular times for exercise and relaxation, meal times, waking and bedtimes, can be calming and reassuring, and can help you to manage your stress.
- 5 Make time for fun and relaxation**
Nurturing yourself is a necessity; not a luxury. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you'll be in a better place to handle life's stressors. Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing can help you manage stress levels.
- 6 Connect with people**
A good support network of colleagues, friends and family can ease your work troubles and help you see things in a different way. Share your thoughts and feelings with others when opportunities arise.

Don't 'bottle up' your feelings. When you share your concerns or feelings with another person, it helps to relieve stress. It's important that the person you talk to is someone that you trust and who you feel can understand and validate your thoughts and feelings.
- 7 Challenge yourself**
Setting yourself goals and challenges, whether at work or outside, such as learning a new language or a new sport, helps to build confidence. This will help you deal with stress.
- 8 Manage your time**
Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. Try not to over commit yourself. Prioritise or delegate tasks to others if you can.
- 9 Work smarter, not harder**
Working smarter means prioritising your work, concentrating on the tasks that will make a real difference.
- 10 Try to be positive and accept the things that can't change**
Look for the positives in life, and things for which you're grateful. Changing a difficult situation isn't always possible. Try to concentrate on the things you do have control over.

Managing relationships

Half of Australian workers have experienced one or more serious incidences of conflict or other negative impacts from work. These experiences are highly correlated with job dissatisfaction.⁵

Relationships of all kinds are key to how we move through life. In order to effectively manage these relationships we need certain skills. They may include earning and giving trust, showing empathy, problem solving skills etc. A key component of managing relationships, however, is the ability to resolve conflicts. If we are able to identify a conflict, then move towards a resolution in a constructive way for all parties involved, we will find our relationships strengthen, with overall benefits to our wellbeing.

Ideas for resolving conflict

- Talk directly to the parties involved
- Choose the right time to talk
- Remain calm
- Plan ahead : consider what you want to say ahead of time
- Don't blame or name call
- Attack the problem, not each other
- Let the other person do the talking, and listen
- Be mindful of your non-verbal communication
- Consider the other persons point of view
- Brainstorm for solutions
- Look for win-win solutions
- Follow through.

BREATHING EXERCISES FOR STRESS

This calming breathing technique for stress, anxiety and panic takes just a few minutes and can be done anywhere.

- Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it
- Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth
- Breathe in gently and regularly. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from one to five. You may not be able to reach five at first
- Then, without pausing or holding your breath, let it flow out gently, counting from one to five again, if you find this helpful
- Keep doing this for three to five minutes.

DID YOU KNOW...

A stress journal can help you identify the regular stressors in your life and the way you deal with them. Each time you feel stressed, keep track of it in your journal. You will begin to see patterns and common themes.

Write down:

- What caused your stress
- How you felt, both physically and emotionally
- How you acted in response
- What you did to make yourself feel better.

Managing your time

If you never seem to have enough time, better time management will help you regain control of your days.

Here are some top tips to manage your time more effectively, which will help you feel more relaxed, focused and in control.



Work out your goals

Work out what you want to achieve in your career or personal life and set priorities. This will help guide you on how to spend your time and how to manage it.



Make a list

To-do lists are a good way to stay organised. They can help you work out your priorities and timings. Make sure you keep the list somewhere accessible. If you use your phone a lot, for example, keep it on your phone.



Focus on results

Good time management at work means doing high-quality work, not high quantity. Focus not on how busy you are but on the results and what you can achieve. Staying an extra hour at work may not be the best way to manage your time.



Have a lunch break

Working through your lunch break can be counter-productive. Take regular small breaks and take at least 30 minutes away from your desk for lunch. This will help you break up your work into more manageable chunks and return to your work re-energised.



Manage your emails

Facing an inbox of emails can be stressful. Making a decision the first time you open an email is crucial for good time management. Try practicing the “four D’s”:

- Delete: you can probably delete half the emails you get immediately
- Do: if the email is urgent or can be completed quickly
- Delegate: if the email can be better dealt with by someone else
- Defer: set aside time later to spend on emails that require longer action.

Where to find more information and support

How do I find a health professional?

If you don't have a regular GP, speak to your local practice or medical centre.

You may want to consider approaching a **physiotherapist** directly by contacting the Australian Physiotherapy Association on 1300 306 622 or use the 'Find a Physio' feature on their website:

→ physiotherapy.asn.au

To find an **occupational therapist** see the Occupational Therapy Australia website:

→ otaus.come.au

To find a **psychologist** see the Australian Psychological Society website:

→ psychology.org.au

healthdirect

Trusted health information and advice online and over the phone, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Funded by the governments of Australia.

→ 1800 022 222

→ healthdirect.gov.au

Arthritis Australia

Arthritis Australia is the peak body and works on behalf of the nearly four million Australians living with arthritis. Learn more about arthritis and how to manage it by contacting Arthritis Australia.

→ 1800 011 041

→ arthritisaustralia.com.au

Safe Work Australia

An Australian government statutory body established in 2008 to develop national policy relating to WHS and workers' compensation.

→ safeworkaustralia.gov.au

About TAL

TAL is Australia's leading life insurance specialist, protecting people – not things – for over 150 years. Today, we insure more than 5 million Australians and in 2022, reached a new milestone paying \$3.5 billion in claims.

At the heart of the claims experience is you. Our goal is to help you lead as healthy and full a life as possible and help you get back to health as quickly as possible, taking into account all of your circumstances: your physical health, your mental wellbeing and your social support.

TAL is focused on your health

Health and wellbeing is at the heart of what we do. From your physical and mental health, to your social and financial wellbeing – helping you be the best you can be is our number one priority.

We want all Australians to live a life as healthy and full as possible, because that's what living this Australian life is all about. Our focus on your health begins when your cover does. Working with you to keep you well and supporting your return to health, with a personalised plan should the unfortunate happen and you suffer an illness or injury.

Because your health and wellbeing is as important to us as it is to you.

References

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TAL Life Limited

ABN 70 050 109 450

GPO Box 5380 Sydney NSW 2001

Customer Service Centre:

1300 209 088 | customerservice@tal.com.au

tal.com.au

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