

How Ergonomics and Accommodations Pay Off

An employer can help any employee succeed, even if she doesn't have arthritis, by making sure she is comfortable at work. Ensuring that a workstation or work environment is ergonomically appropriate — that is, physically well suited to the person and her job requirements — is key.

The goal is for an employee to keep frequently used items close at hand and to maintain neutral positions, meaning those that avoid awkward postures that stress joints or muscles. These can ultimately lead not only to pain and medical issues but also to lost work hours and productivity. For example, a computer monitor should be at eye level, a keyboard should be at a height so the typist doesn't have to bend his wrists, and if he has to lift packages off the floor, he should bend and lift with the hips and knees, not the back.



The employer can help by providing proper equipment and guidance from an occupational therapist who specializes in ergonomics. Ergonomic solutions are not one-size-fits-all. Some equipment may be appropriate for some workers but not others, depending on their anatomical structure, job requirements and mobility considerations, among others. And just because a piece of equipment or furniture is labeled “ergonomic” doesn't mean it's a good fit for everyone.

That's especially true for employees who live with arthritis. Depending on the type of arthritis and how the person is affected, she might benefit from equipment or tools to ease strain on particular joints, or he might need devices or software to help him see if arthritis affects his eyes.

For an office environment, a few common ergonomic solutions that can help employees maintain neutral body positions to protect joints and prevent strain and pain include:

- An adjustable chair and making sure the employee knows how to adjust it.
- A footrest for employees who are below average height, allowing them to keep hands and wrists in neutral positions and not overreach for the keyboard and mouse.
- A platform to raise the computer monitor to the appropriate eye level, preventing the need to look up, down or to the side for extended periods.
- An adjustable sit-to-stand desk, so the employee isn't in one position for too long.

Needs vary, and so do reasonable accommodations, which overlap with ergonomic needs. The employee will likely know best what kinds of problems he is dealing with, and he might know of solutions. If not, an ergonomic specialist can help identify solutions.

Although some employers worry about the potential costs of such accommodations, most don't cost anything, and they pay off for employers as well as employees. An ongoing survey by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) of thousands of employers found that 56% of accommodations cost absolutely nothing, and the average cost of the others was just \$500. Employers reported the return on their investment paid off in terms of retaining the valued employee, increasing the employee's productivity and attendance, and eliminating the cost of training a new employee. They reported other benefits to providing the accommodation, as well, including improved interactions among co-workers, improved overall company morale and productivity, enhanced diversity, improved customer interactions, increased safety and savings on workers compensation or other insurance costs.

Source: Arthritis Foundation ([Arthritis@Work](#))