

Ergonomics:

It all Starts with the Chair

A CHAIR should be looked at as a long-term investment in employee productivity and satisfaction. Inexpensive, broken chairs can subconsciously tell employees that they're not valued. Given the amount of time we spend in our office chairs, it's important that employers purchase quality chairs. A good chair provides proper support and comfort and will allow an employee to work in comfort. This increases job satisfaction and productivity.

Furthermore, inadequate chairs can contribute to aches, pains and illness. The cost of an injured or ill employee can easily surpass the price of a quality chair.

FEATURES to look for when selecting an ergonomic chair:

- A seat that is fully adjustable for height, seat pan depth, tilt and recline; with lock feature.
- Adjustable lumbar support.
- A good backrest that is high enough to support the back and the neck.
- Seat width that is adequate for the person using it.
- Arm rests that are adjustable.
- Swivel feature.
- A minimum of five casters to prevent tipping.

CHECK THE HEIGHT. Ergonomic office chairs should have a height-adjustable seat. Not everybody is the same size so look for the chairs that offer the widest range of adjustability; usually, about 16 to 21 inches is a good standard height. If you have employees who are taller than 6 foot 5 inches or shorter than 5 foot 0 inches, measure to ensure the chairs will adjust far enough for them. When seated, the feet should be flat on the floor with the thighs parallel to the ground.

CHECK THE WIDTH AND DEPTH. When you are looking for an ergonomic chair, you need to look for one that is about 17 to 20 inches in width. This is the standard width for an ergonomic office chair. Larger or smaller people may need different sized chairs to accommodate their specific body shapes. Depth usually refers to the space from the front of the seat to the back. When seated, there should be enough space to fit two to three fingers between the backs of the legs and the front of the chair.

CHECK THE LUMBAR SUPPORT. This crucial piece refers to the support given to your lower back. The lower back is where most back trouble starts and you need to have seats that will address this issue and prevent any further damage. Making sure the lumbar support is adjusted properly will help alleviate slouching and low back pain, however having the lumbar support in the wrong spot can cause increased pain.

CHECK THE BACK. Of course, a good chair should have good overall back support and it should be adjusted to fit the person using it. Back supports that are broken or reclined too much can lead to back pain, and should be replaced if they are worn out.

Remember, office chairs have a service life and should be replaced occasionally. Some chairs wear out faster than others, depending on the environment they are used in and the quality of the chair. While a \$500 chair may seem expensive, the lost productivity from an injured employee, coupled with a lower back injury is much more expensive in the long run.

Sometimes, employees wish to use a seating device that is not your average chair. Ergonomic ball chairs, kneeling chairs and saddle chairs are all examples of seating devices seen in some offices. While these devices are sometimes used to treat specific conditions, unless directed by a physician employees should only use these devices intermittently throughout the day. In fact, Peter Budnick, a certified professional ergonomist with Ergoweb, strongly discourages the use of ball chairs for office use. (For more information from Budnick, see [his article](http://www.ergoweb.com/news/detail.cfm?id=1091) at <http://www.ergoweb.com/news/detail.cfm?id=1091>.)

As discussed, a good chair can reduce the likelihood of employee discomfort and even injury. Investing wisely upfront can save time, money and resources down the road. If you would like additional ergonomic assistance, or would like some assessments to determine if your employees need additional attention, give us a call. Montana State Fund Safety Management Consultants are available to assist with your ergonomic needs.