Health at Work

Exercises at the Office

This series of exercises are for anyone who spends long periods of time sat at a desk or in a car. These exercises are designed to mobilise joints and relax tension in the shoulder girdle.

Exercise 1. Cervical Spine Range of Motion Exercise

To maintain your flexibility it is wise to encourage the joints of the body through their full range of motion every day. To improve the flexibility of the cervical spine (neck) the following exercises can be performed.

Rotate the head to the right and then slowly to the left. Take a breath in each position. You may feel some tension in the upper trapezius muscle. This tension will release as you hold the stretch.

Then gently and slowly encourage a side bend of the head to the right and then the left.
It is normal to feel tension in the side of the neck you are bending away from in this stretch. Again, this tension will release as you hold the stretch.

Finally allow the chin to fall forward towards the chest. You will feel the tension between your shoulder blades. This will start to fade if you hold the position for a couple of breaths. I seldom recommend extension (the opposite of this stretch) as this can cause irritation to the facet joints of the spine which are the joints between the vertebrae and therefore can lead to pain.

**Exercise 2. Forearm stretch**

If you have been doing a lot of typing or mouse work, you may find you have arm ache in the lower part of the arms and wrists. Here is a simple stretch you can do to help release the tension in the forearms.

Whilst sitting, bring your hands in front of you into a prayer position. Allow the forearms to lower in order that they become into a horizontal position as shown in the photo.

Then gently take your hands, whilst in the prayer position, to one side maintaining the forearm in as horizontal position as possible.

Then move across to the other side
You will feel the tension in the forearm start to subside as you hold the position for a few seconds.

Repeat two of three times each way.

Repeat frequently throughout the day if possible. Remember to breathe.

**Exercise 3. Brugger Relief Exercise**

If you sit for long periods at a computer, after approximately 20 minutes of a static posture, the ligaments of the spine become over-used. Ligaments are made of a tensile, stretchy tissue, over-use can lead to a change in posture. It is therefore important to counter the effects of a static posture. The ‘Brugger Relief’ exercise encourages the postural muscles to contract and reduce the stretch on the postural ligaments.

Firstly stand up, with your elbows in and forearms lifted to 90 degrees. The hands face upwards (see the photo).

Set the shoulder position by drawing the shoulder blades downwards and then gently bring the shoulder blades together behind you (retract). As you do this, allow the chest to ‘open’ at the front. You may feel a slight stretch across the front of the chest.

This position encourages the postural muscles of the back to contract whilst at the same time encouraging the muscles at the front of the chest to stretch.
Keeping the elbows close to the sides of the body, gently take the forearms out to the sides (as the photo shows)

Avoid tensing the shoulders by continuing to keep the shoulder blades drawn downwards and the shoulder blades gently coming together at the back.

Encourage the lower abdominal muscles to draw in as you do this exercise to protect the lower back and allow your core muscles to contract.

Finally, gently encourage the wrists to extend back and fingers to stretch apart (as per the photo)

The different parts of the Brugger Relief Exercise are designed to encourage contraction of the muscles that don’t work during a static, seated position and to gently stretch the muscles that become overworked.

This helps to prevent the over-stretch of the ligaments (a phenomena known as ‘creep’) and to strengthen the postural muscles.

Repeat the Brugger Relief exercise frequently throughout the day. Hold the posture for 20 seconds every 20 minutes if possible. Remember to Breathe.
Exercise 4 – Exercise to reduce tension in the arm, shoulder and neck.

If you sit for long periods at a desk, you probably feel an increase in tension in the shoulder girdle and neck muscles. Here is a simple stretch that you can do whilst sat at a desk.

Whilst seated, place your feet firmly on the floor. Hold onto the side of the chair and start to lean away from the hand holding onto the chair.

You will start to feel a stretch in the forearm, shoulder and upper trapezius muscle.
Allow your body to lean away from the arm as if the arm is an anchor.

Remember to breathe.

Repeat frequently throughout the day.

**Exercise 5 – Seated Chest Stretch**

If you sit for long periods at a computer (or in a car), you may notice that your shoulders are starting to draw forward, often referred to as ‘rounded’ shoulders. This is a sign that there is increased use of the pectoralis muscle of the chest. Here is a stretch that is easily done whilst sat at the desk (or waiting at traffic lights) to release the tension in this area.

Whilst seated, place the feet firmly on the floor and the hands to the side of the head. Gently encourage the elbows back to open up the chest area.

Breathe in as you encourage the chest to open and let the breath go as you relax back.

It is a good idea to hold in the abdominal muscles at the same time to protect your spine. Avoid arching your back during this exercise. If you notice tension in your shoulders whilst doing this stretch, the following exercises (18, 19, 20 and 21) will help you too.

Repeat frequently throughout the day.

**Exercise 6 – Upper Back Stretch**

If you sit for long periods at a computer (or in a car), you may notice tension building in your mid back between your shoulder blades. This is often a result of a static posture.
where the postural muscles and ligaments are overworked. Here is an easy to perform seated upper back stretch which will help to relieve the tension building.

Whilst seated, place the feet firmly on the floor. Interlock the fingers with the palms facing you. Then stretch the hands forward and curve the spine back towards the chair. You can increase the stretch by dropping your head forward between the arms (not shown in the photo).

If possible, gently draw in your lower abdominal muscles to encourage the core muscles to contract.

Breathe in and out 2 or 3 times.

Repeat frequently throughout the day.

**Exercise 7 – Seated Shoulder Rolls**

If you sit for long periods at a computer (or in a car), you may experience tension in your shoulder girdle. A simple and effective tension relieving exercise are shoulder rolls.
Whilst seated, place the feet firmly on the floor.

Draw your shoulders down and around in the largest circle possible.

If possible, gently draw in the abdominal muscles so that your core muscles contract.

Repeat 2 or 3 times in a forward direction, then again backwards.

Repeat frequently throughout the day.

**Exercise 8 – Seated Shoulder Stretch part 1**

If you are prone to tension in your shoulders this exercise can help to release tension in the back of the shoulder joint.

Whilst seated, place the feet firmly on the floor.

Take one arm across the body and then hug that arm in against the body with the other arm.
Avoid compressing the elbow joint, instead apply pressure just above the elbow joint.

Breathe in and out a couple of times to relax the body. Swap to the other side. Repeat frequently throughout the day.

**Exercise 9 – Seated Shoulder Stretch part 2**

If you are prone to tension in your shoulders this exercise can help to release tension in the **front** of the shoulder joint.

Whilst seated, place the feet firmly on the floor. Take one arm over your head and allow the forearm to drop behind the head. With the free arm, gently encourage the elbow back to increase the stretch of the upper arm and armpit.

Breathe in and out a couple of times to relax the body. Swap to the other side. Repeat frequently throughout the day.

**Exercise 10 – stretches for the lower limb – Buttocks**

Sitting on a chair, place the lower part of the leg over the thigh of the other leg.
Gently encourage the chest forward.

You will feel an increase in the stretch in the buttock area. Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds until you feel the stretch release a little.

Avoid placing the ankle over the thigh as this can over stretch the ankle joint.
Exercise 11 – Stretch for the lower limb – Hamstrings (back of thigh)

Standing, place one foot on the seat of a chair. Gently encourage the chest forward.

You will notice a stretch in the back of the thigh.

Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds until you feel the stretch release a little.

Swap to the other side.

You can increase the stretch by encouraging the foot to flex back towards you.

Exercise 12 – Stretch for the lower limb – Quadriceps muscle (front of thigh)
Standing, bring one foot up behind you so that you can take hold of the lower part of the leg. (See photo).

Avoid holding the ankle joint, instead take hold of the leg, this avoids stressing the ankle joint. Take hold of something fixed with the other hand to give you balance.

Gently increase the stretch in the front of the thigh be encouraging the pelvis forwards.

Hold the position for 15 to 20 seconds until you feel the tension in the muscle release. Swap to the other side.

**Exercise 13 – seated twists**

If you sit for long periods at a computer, you may notice that tension builds in the mid and lower back. If you are prone to tension in your back this exercise can help to release tension.

Whilst seated, place the feet firmly on the floor. Take one arm across your body and if possible take hold of the side of the chair seat or side of the leg. Place the other arm over the back of the chair or if the chair is a high back chair use the handle or seat to encourage the rotation stretch of your spine.

Allow the twist to start from the lower back and work your way up the spine with the twist. Finally allowing your shoulders to rotate around so that you can look behind you.

Breathe in and out a couple of times to relax the body.

Swap to the other side. Repeat frequently throughout the day.
Exercise 14 – Seated Roll Down (and up)

If you sit for long periods at a computer, you may notice that tension builds in the mid and lower back. If you are prone to tension in your back this exercise can help to release tension. Whilst seated, place the feet firmly on the floor.

Before starting, gently draw in your abdominal muscles to help activate your core strength and protect your spine.

Allow the head to fall forward so the chin is resting on the chest.

Slowly allow yourself to roll forward keeping the head heavy and allow the arms to come forward.

Continue to roll down so that eventually your chest is resting on your knees and your arms are resting on the floor.
Take a breath or two in this position.

Gently draw in your lower abdominal muscles and start to come back up to a seated position.

Focus on allowing your vertebrae to ‘stack’ back one on top of the other from the bottom up until you have returned to a seated position.

Allow your head to come up last.

Repeat frequently throughout the day.

If you experience any discomfort, it may be a good idea to book in for a ‘tune up’.

15. Standing Stretch – for the calf muscle and achilles

Here is a two-part calf stretch which targets both the large calf muscle and then the lower achilles tendon.
Stand behind your chair or in front of a wall. Take a step back and encourage the heel of the back foot to lower towards the floor. Bend the front leg so that you can lower your body and increase the stretch. Avoid the knee of the front leg going too far forward to avoid pressure on the knee joint.

Check that your back foot is not pointing out to the side, if it is, encourage the foot to point forward. You should feel a stretch in the calf muscle.

For the second part of the stretch, bring the back foot closer towards the front foot and again lower the body straight downwards. This will encourage a stretch in the achilles tendon section of the calf (lower part). Again, avoid the knee of the front leg going too far forward to avoid pressure on the knee joint. Ensure both feet point forward. If you feel that it is difficult to balance, allow the feet to be wider part ie standing on tram lines rather than a tight rope.

Hold each position for a count of 15 secs. Repeat each side.

If you experience any discomfort, it may be a good idea to get yourself checked – calf strains and achilles tendonitis are common injuries that are preventable.

16. Standing Side Bends

Sitting and being sedentary for long periods can cause loading or compression of the joints of the spine and shortening of the ligaments that connect between the joints of the spine and the muscles that move the joints. ‘Standing Side Bends’ can be used to give you a sense of elongation and gentle stretch for the ligaments and muscles. This can help to mobilise the joints between the vertebrae of the spine. This is another exercise that can be done whilst at the office.
Whilst standing, interlock your fingers and turn the palms face outwards. Lift the arms over the head and if possible keep the upper arms close to the ears. Take a breath in. Gently stretch to one side.

Imagine that your feet are planted firmly into the ground and you are gently pulling your upper body away from the feet, legs and pelvis.

Breathe out.

Gently pull in your lower abdominal muscles and bring yourself back up to standing as you breathe in and out as you reach upwards.

When you are ready, take a breath in and gently stretch to the other side. Same feeling of imaging your feel planted and your are lengthening you body away from your feet, legs and pelvis. Breathe out. Then return to a standing position.

Repeat frequently throughout the day.

17. Standing Shoulder exercise to relieve tension and stress

Sitting at a desk, using a computer and being sedentary for long periods can lead to tension in the shoulder girdle, especially if you are feeling stressed or under pressure in some way such as working to a deadline.

Here is a simple exercise to keep your shoulder girdle moving, reduce stress and maintain a relaxed state of mind.
Stand up and whilst taking a breath in, allow your arms to rise up to your sides and lift overhead, bringing the finger tips together. Then slowly lower the arms again as you breathe out. If you can, repeat this sequence for 10 breaths.

This exercise can also be done seated if your chair and space permits. Repeat frequently throughout the day.

**18. Chest Stretch**

Here is a simple exercise to stretch the chest muscle and relieve tension in the front of the shoulders. This stretch can also be done seated if you shift your body forward so that you are sat on the front part of the seat. For best results perform this exercise whilst standing.

Interlock your fingers behind your back then straighten the arms. Allow the chest to push forward and at the same time encourage the arms and interlocked hands to move away from you back.

Take two or three breaths in this position.

Repeat frequently throughout the day.

**19. Seated Side Bends**

Sitting at a desk, using a computer and being sedentary for long periods can lead to a feeling of ‘compression’ in the spine. Large muscles that run along the sides of the spine can feel tense and even achy. If you have been ‘hunched’ over a desk all day, you may even experience pain.
Here is a simple exercise to gently stretch the joints of the spine and the larger muscles situated around the spine.

This stretch can be done standing or sitting. If done whilst sitting, as shown in the photo, one arm can be used to support the body as you stretch towards that side.

As you stretch over to one side, also reach upwards to help elongate the side of the body on the stretched side.

Take a few breaths in this position. As you breath the rib cage expands and this encourages a stretch of the muscles between the ribs known as the intercostals muscles.

Repeat frequently throughout the day.

20. Slow Walking

This next exercise is based on a Tai Chi exercise. It helps with balance and general relaxation as you refocus and practice of mindfulness; a good strategy to de-stress during a frenetic day at work. A good time to do this exercise is during a lunch break.

Whilst standing, adopt a relaxed pose. Allow your shoulders to relax down. Breathe in and out a few times and allow any tension you are feeling to fade away as you breathe out.

To prepare, gently draw in your lower abdominal muscles by gently sucking in the muscle below your belly button. This helps to engage your ‘core’ muscles.
When you feel ready and relaxed, transfer your weight to one leg then lift the other leg and begin the motion of walking. Allow the heel of the foot to come to the floor then lower the rest of the foot.

Focus your attention on the foot as you do this. Then, transfer your weight across and lift the other foot, slowly bring the leg forward and again allow the heel to land first and then the rest of the foot to make contact with the floor.

To help you maintain your balance, keep the feet hip width apart as if you are walking on tram lines rather than a tight rope. Check that you are still engaging your abdominal muscles. Move slowly throughout at a steady relaxed pace. Keep all parts of the movement at the same speed. Focus on each foot as you place it on the floor.

Take 10 steps.

Exercises provided by Leiza Alpass, MSc DC, Chiropractor

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