

Issue Date: Monday , December 8 , 2008

In the hot seat

Many people who work before a computer for long hours fall prey to backache. **V. Kumara Swamy** helps you choose chairs that are easy on your back



COMFORT ZONE: Make sure to select a chair that's right for your body

arms and hands. Arising as aches and pains or numbness, these injuries can become crippling disorders that prevent sufferers from working or leading normal lives. "A preliminary result of our ongoing study of over 35,000 Indian computer professionals (2001-2008) has found that over 50 per cent sustains injuries within a year of starting their first computer-dependent job," says Dr Sharan.

A little more than a year into his job at a software firm in Calcutta, Kalyansis Roy, 27, began to suffer from recurring backache. Finally, he decided to consult a doctor. "He asked me to do a few back strengthening exercises and replace the chair I was using in my office with a more ergonomic one," says Roy.

The latter part of the doctor's advice was impossible to carry out as his office refused to get a chair that would help him deal with his backache. "Now I do the exercises and have made as many adjustments to my chair as possible," says Roy.

Doctors are unanimous in their opinion that those who work for long hours on a computer can minimise the risk of developing backache if they use the right kind of chair.

Dr Deepak Sharan, director of the RECOUP Neuromusculoskeletal Rehabilitation Centre, Bangalore, and who specialises in treating occupation-based injuries, says that people like Roy, who work on the computer for long stretches, may develop repetitive strain injury (RSI). RSI is a group of overuse disorders affecting the muscles, tendons and nerves of the neck, upper and lower back, chest, shoulders,

Although sitting requires little physical effort when compared to standing or walking, it doesn't mean that there is no stress on the body while a person is seated. The lower part of the spine, or the lumbar region, bears all the stress when one is seated. While a wrong posture and repetitive work also lead to backaches, the lack of proper chairs is a key factor as well. The market is flooded with so-called ergonomic chairs, or chairs that are supposed to blend with a person's body dimensions and activities. But experts warn that one shouldn't always believe the "ergonomic" label blindly.

"A chair becomes ergonomic only when it fits a worker's size, his or her particular workstation, and the tasks that must be performed there," says Dr Sharan. "There is no guarantee that such chairs will suit everybody. For example, a chair could be too high and the armrest too far apart for a short, slim person. In addition, these chairs may not suit every task at the workstation. A chair becomes truly ergonomic only when it suits the user's specific body dimensions," says Dr Sharan.

Clearly, when it comes to choosing computer chairs, one size does not fit all. "Each person's body and work profile is different. One has to keep that in mind while choosing a chair," says Sayan Biswas, store chief of Godrej Lifespace on Park Street, Calcutta. The shop has a variety of chairs that have been designed keeping various work profiles in mind.

But are there any rules of thumb that we can follow while selecting a chair for one's workstation? For people who work on the computer for more than 8-10 hours, Biswas recommends a chair with a medium-sized backrest with an "S" curve. "Most office chairs have C-shaped backrests, which are not good for the back as they don't complement the shape of the spine," he says. Though a chair with an S-shaped backrest may initially be a little uncomfortable, it will help in the long run.

Experts advise that the angle of the seat and the height and angle of the backrest should be coordinated to allow for the most comfortable weight load on the spinal column. As far as the seat is concerned, they recommend a length of 43-50cm. The chair should be long enough for a person to lean on the lumbar backrest without the seat pressing into the backs of the knees. "The front edge of the seat should be rounded and padded. Avoid bucket-type seats as they are hard on the back," says Dr Sharan.

The armrest is another key area of the chair. While Biswas says that an adjustable armrest in a simple T-shape is better than the elaborate D-shaped ones, doctors have a different opinion. "One should lower the armrests to the thigh level and should not rest the elbows on them while typing. If that is not possible, simply throw the armrests away. Ignore the chair salesman if he tells you otherwise," says Dr Sharan firmly.

As far as upholstery is concerned, J.P. Singh, director of Span Seating, a Delhi-based firm that imports computer chairs, advises either leather or cotton. "Some people prefer leatherette or rexin but that is not a good idea. Such chairs tend to

make the user sweat a lot, especially in humid cities like Calcutta," he says.

Computer chairs are available in a wide range of prices. A simple small chair with a C-shaped backrest (good enough for those who use a home PC for short stretches, according to Biswas) costs around Rs 3,300 whereas a top-end chair could cost anywhere between Rs 60,000 and Rs 1,00,000. However, the more expensive chairs aren't necessarily more ergonomic.

So if you need to spend long hours on the computer, make sure you use a chair that supports you properly. It is worth investing in an ergonomic chair when your health depends on it.

