

O

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Back pain in people of working age is a major medical problem and has a serious effect upon industry through sick absence and avoidable cost. The CBI estimates the cost to industry from lost time due to back pain at £208 per employee per annum.

In the office environment the most significant cause of back pain is a poorly designed work station of which the desk chair is a major component. Display Screen Equipment regulations call for a personalised risk assessment to ensure a correct ergonomic fit to the specific user. The HSE states that equipment such as desks, chairs, monitor arms and laptop holders should comply with BS EN ISO 9241 Part 5

In practice this means that an office chair should be stable with five feet and allow the user to be comfortable and to move freely. The seat should be adjustable for height and the backrest should be adjustable for both height and tilt. Typically the range of chair height should be adjustable in the range of 400-520mm to accommodate the majority of the working population. A footrest should be available if required and the chair should be adjustable so that the user's elbows form an angle of between 70-90 degrees when using the keyboard.

Ergonomists say that to reduce discomfort, muscle fatigue and long term health problems the best chairs are those that encourage and support small posture changes throughout the day in response to the needs of different tasks. The design of the chair and its' adjustability should facilitate this.

However people also need training in how to avoid discomfort and health problems. This should cover instruction on how to adjust the chair as well as the need to change posture frequently. Workers should be reminded of the need for regular movement and breaks away from the desk.

Office chairs need to look good as well as being safe to use. There are some very stylish and expensive mesh chairs which have become increasingly popular over the past ten years or so. However, most chairs are still specified with fabric covered foam upholstery. These can be ordered "off the shelf" or can be bespoke from a wide range of upholstery fabrics to match the interior design of the office space.

The Office Furniture Advisory Service (OFAS) provide detailed and impartial information on all aspects of office and contract furniture and related subjects including office seating See www.ofas.org.uk or call 01344 779438