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## **Standing On The Job**

By: Caroline Tapp-McDougall

Standing is a natural human posture that poses no particular **health** concerns. However, standing for long hours at a time is part of many jobs and the resulting fatigue can result in many work-related hazards.

### **Part Of The Job**

Being on their feet for most of the day is part of the job for millions of Canadians who work as bank tellers, cashiers, restaurant servers, retail salespeople, **healthcare** workers, teachers, casino workers, or assembly line staff. In many cases, people in these positions are reluctant to take a break and be found 'sitting down on the job' for fear of being seen as lazy or unproductive by managers or customers.

Yet the risks of standing are real. For example, Hazards magazine in the UK reported that lower limb disorders caused more than two million sick days a year in 2005. This fact alone shows that the productivity and personal **health** costs can be substantial.

There is a need to look at ways to improve both the ergonomics of many workstations where people are forced into awkward and repetitive standing positions. There is also a need to provide ongoing education programs about the hazards of standing for long hours in the workplace.

### **The Science Of Standing**

Keeping the body in an upright position, even while standing, takes considerable muscular effort. This effort reduces the blood supply to loaded muscles which, in turn, speeds up the onset of fatigue and causes pain in the muscles used to maintain an upright position – the legs, the back, and the neck. Reduced movement of body fluids results in veins becoming inflamed and feet, ankles, and legs swelling.

Standing for long periods of time has also been shown to increase the risk for arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) in men. And there is the danger of pre-term delivery and reduced birth weights if a pregnant woman stands for more than three hours at a time (Source: Canadian Women's Health Network).

It's no surprise that muscle soreness, fatigue, and swelling in the lower extremities often result from working in a standing position. Over time, other serious, enduring health problems and soft tissue injuries will likely manifest in conditions such as varicose veins, tendonitis, lower back pain, restricted blood flow, and ongoing soft tissue damage to tendons and ligaments. Stiffness of the neck and shoulders can also occur. As well, the risk of knee or hip arthritis, bunions, and other disorders of the legs and feet increases for workers who stand for long periods of time.

### **Suggestions For Better Health**

Fortunately, jobs that require standing can be reconfigured by implementing the following suggestions:

- Footwear – Make sure the worker has comfortable, appropriate footwear for the job. Even a simple change in socks can improve comfort.
- Adjustable workstations – These can provide workers with a choice of positions that allow for regular movement. Workers should be encouraged to keep tools and materials within easy reach to avoid awkward bending, stretching, and reaching. If possible, allow workers the space to sit at the right height for the work being done and provide adequate room for their knees.
- Chairs and stools – The right chair or stool can go a long way to increasing employee productivity. Comfort is important so set the chair or stool at the right height for the work being done.

- Take a break – Allow workers suitable rest periods where individuals can sit in lunch rooms or rest areas. Encourage regular stretching and exercise programs that will improve blood supply to working muscles and reduce overall fatigue.
- Flooring – Constant walking on hard surfaces can cause progressive damage to bones in the foot, especially the heel. Concrete or metal floors are not good for workers to stand on. Try covering such floors, at least at the employee's work station, with secured mats that have anti-trip, slanted edges. Thick foam rubber mats with too much cushioning should be avoided as they actually increase the risk of fatigue and are easy to trip on. Materials such as wood, cork, carpeting, or rubber are gentler on the feet.
- Employee education – Employees should be taught about the importance of regularly moving and even shifting their weight during a shift. Periodic breaks should also be encouraged.
- Weight reduction programs – All employees should be encouraged to maintain a healthy lifestyle outside of work. This is particularly important for workers who spend long periods of time standing. The less weight on a worker's joints, the less is the effect of standing. ■

Caroline Tapp-McDougall is the publisher of *Solutions: Canada's Family Guide to Home Health Care and Wellness* and the author of *The Complete Canadian Eldercare Guide*.