

Ergonomic Tips for Dietary Staff

This PSHSA Fast Fact is intended to assist workers, supervisors and managers in institutional kitchens and members of their JHSCs become aware of some ergonomic solutions to real and potential problems in their workplaces.

Repetitive strain injuries to the musculoskeletal system result from repetitive, stressful or awkward movements that are beyond the individual's abilities.

Identifying Ergonomic Risks

If you work in a dietary department, you may face one or more of the following working conditions:

- long periods of standing
- heavy lifting
- repetitive arm and hand work
- high heat and humidity
- wet and slippery floors

Your workplace can be changed to ease the physical stress of your job.

Facilitating Healthy Working Postures

A healthy working posture is one that changes frequently. Where possible, alternate between tasks that require standing, walking and sitting. Use chairs, "leaning stools," foot rests, pieces of anti-fatigue matting and anti-fatigue shoe insoles to relieve the stresses related to standing.

Arrange your workstation so that it permits a good working posture. Ensure that:

- The height of the work does not require you to stoop down or reach upwards.
- Work is placed within a comfortable reach so that items you must reach frequently are close to you. Make sure that access to conveyor belts does not require overreaching.

- Work is placed primarily in front of you so that you do not have to twist.
- Menu cards are easy for you to read and are placed where you can see what is marked on them.

Eliminating Heavy Lifting

Heavy lifting should be avoided. For heavy loads:

- Use siphon systems and automatic tipping mechanisms as alternatives to moving containers of liquids.
- Use mechanical lifting aids to eliminate the need to lift (e.g., bowl jack).
- Put wheels on containers (e.g., garbage cans and flour bins), so that you can push rather than carry them. Ensure the wheels are kept free of grease so they will move easily on the floor.
- Store frequently used products in small containers of manageable size and weight. Place them at mid-body height. Consider repacking bulk items, if necessary.

Reducing Hand and Arm Work

Overuse of hands, wrists and arms in jobs that are repetitive, require force or demand awkward positions can lead to health problems. The resulting wear and tear on the body can cause problems such as tendinitis, carpal tunnel syndrome and muscle strains.

To avoid overuse:

- Consider varying food preparation and serving activities when planning menus. For example, do not plan a meal where every food item must be stirred by hand for long periods; vary serving activities to include a scoop, tongs and a flipper.
- Use automated processes to reduce repetitive work when possible (e.g., food processor, potato peeling machine, or electric mixer).
- Use tools and other hand implements which are designed to keep your wrists straight (not bent) and allow operation by the whole hand, not just one

finger or thumb (e.g., an ice cream scoop with a power grip release, grill flipper with a bent and raised handle to keep the wrist neutral, or a knife handle curved to allow neutral wrist positioning).

- Reduce the amount of force needed in hand and arm work (e.g., keep knives sharp, use the appropriate tool).
- If appropriate, adjust the consistency and temperature of food items for ease of handling (e.g., slightly thaw ice cream before scooping).
- If gloves are needed, make sure they fit well, do not bunch up and offer some surface traction to improve grip, if needed.
- Use task rotation systems to allow each worker to change her/his working posture and use different parts of the body throughout the day.
- Avoid doing the same task over and over (e.g., stirring, chopping or serving).
- Take breaks to prevent (not recover from) fatigue.

Avoiding Heat Stress

Look at ways to avoid heat stress from occurring by:

- Using air conditioning, especially in the summer.
- Scheduling work and rest periods to eliminate heat stress in places where air conditioning is not feasible.
- Reducing cooking during the day.

- Using microwave cooking whenever possible, especially in the summer.
- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of heat stress and ensuring that anyone who is affected receives prompt treatment.
- Recording the temperature at various workstations in the department at frequent intervals.
- Making drinking water accessible. Drink plenty of water throughout the day.

Dealing with Wet and Slippery Floors

Prevent injuries by:

- Ensuring that spills are cleaned up immediately. In general, whoever spills or drops something should pick or wipe it up immediately.
- Good housekeeping is the cornerstone of prevention.
- Investigating floor covering options that will make wet floors less slippery.
 - Wearing shoes with good traction (e.g., rubber soles).