

Sewing Machine Operators

***Feel Better!
Work Better!***



Position that may cause pain

- ▶ **How to Prevent Job-Related Pain**
- ▶ **How to Adjust Your Chair and Other Equipment to Fit Your Body**

There are many ways your work area can be made more comfortable for you.



Position that may be more comfortable

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Is your job causing you pain?

- ▶ **Pain, numbness, or tingling in the shoulders, neck, back and hands** affect many sewing machine operators. These symptoms may be related to your job.
- ▶ **Symptoms may start gradually.** Many people try to ignore them at first. But if you ignore them, symptoms can get worse and become harder to treat. Inform your employer and get medical care right away if you have symptoms.
- ▶ **These symptoms may indicate a serious injury** that can interfere with your work and personal activities. They can even lead to permanent disability.



Why do sewing machine operators have these problems?

- ▶ **An uncomfortable work position.** Sewing work forces you to hold your body in one position for long periods. If it is an uncomfortable position, pain and injury can result. Your position is determined by the “fit” of your chair and foot control, your need to see the work, and your need to grasp or hold materials in place.
- ▶ **Repeated or forceful motions.** Reaching, stitching, pinching, pulling... hundreds of times a day. Each motion can cause small injuries to muscles and joints.
- ▶ **Long work hours and few breaks** mean less time for muscles and joint injuries to heal.
- ▶ **Hard edges.** If the edge of your chair, worktable or table legs press into your body for long periods, it can damage nerves or other soft body parts.

How Can Injuries Be Prevented?

By law, your employer is responsible for providing a safe and healthy workplace. Here are some things you and your employer can do to prevent injuries:

- ▶ **Talk with others at work.** Do workers have symptoms? Are the causes of injury present? Does the employer know about preventive actions to take?
- ▶ **Use adjustable chairs.** Employers should get durable industrial chairs that have:
 - adjustable seat heights
 - padded seats
 - swivel bases with five legs (not four)
 - padded adjustable backrestsCarefully evaluate chairs with built-in footrests and arm rests to make sure they fit workers and the movements they make. If these parts don't fit, adjust or remove them.
- ▶ **Use foot supports.** Foot supports are an important part of the seated workstation. Employers may need a mechanic to adjust, install, or build up foot supports in the right position for each worker (height, forward/back and left/right).
- ▶ **Adjust your equipment to “fit” your body.** (see box on overleaf)
- ▶ **Improve lighting.** Employers should provide “gooseneck” lamps (in addition to general room light) for each sewing machine, if possible. Don't use extension cords; they can cause tripping or fire hazards. Older individuals need brighter light. Point the light so there are no shadows where you stitch or prepare work.
- ▶ **Check your vision.** Prescription eyeglasses or contact lenses may help you at work. Employers can help by providing time off and vision care insurance.
- ▶ **Make reaching easier.** Avoid twisting your back, or long reaches.
 - Stack your materials and finished pieces close to you.
 - Place bins and carts as close as possible.
 - Install convenient shelves or tool holders if needed.
- ▶ **Provide training.** A trainer/consultant should help each operator adjust her entire workstation, including chair and foot supports. Operators need to learn how to work the chairs, and what adjustments to make. Also have the consultant train a few operators to assist their co-workers. Each worker should know the early warning symptoms of injury.
- ▶ **Take tiny breaks.** Take frequent, five second breaks. Just lean back, stretch, and take a deep breath at least every 15 minutes. In addition, get up and walk around every half hour or so. You will probably find that you get more done, and feel better, too.
- ▶ **Get medical care for symptoms.**

Taking Action to Prevent Injuries

- ▶ **Form a safety committee.** It can be a big help in keeping your workplace safe. Get key people from both labor and management to participate. A successful committee is one that has strong employer support. An experienced ergonomic consultant can provide technical assistance. Here's what a safety committee can do:
 - Talk to workers and inspect jobs to find conditions that can cause injuries.
 - Encourage workers to report work-related injuries and symptoms to their supervisor.
 - Identify the jobs that have caused injuries.
 - Figure out how particular jobs may be causing injuries.
 - Develop practical solutions and recommend that management try them out on a few individuals.
 - Check to see if the changes are effective before recommending them for all affected jobs.
 - Monitor employees using new equipment and/or making other job changes.

What Does the Law Say?

- ▶ **Your employer may have to follow a California rule about repetitive work.**
Find out:
 - Were two or more workers injured within the last 12 months? The injured workers must have done the same type of work.
 - Did a doctor report that each injury is mainly caused by the job? Each worker can have a different diagnosis, as long as it's related to the same kind of repetitive work.
- ▶ **If the answer to both questions is "Yes," the employer must change the work or equipment to prevent injuries.** Worker training also is required.

This rule is called Repetitive Motion Injuries (General Industry Safety Order 5110). It is enforced by Cal/OSHA.

What is Cal/OSHA? It is California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health. This government agency investigates workers' complaints and answers questions about workplace safety rules. Complaints are confidential. Find the phone number in the blue Government Pages near the front of the phone book. Look under: State of California, Industrial Relations, Division of Occupational Safety and Health, Compliance or Enforcement.

For employers, California has the Consultation Service (1-800-963-9424). This agency explains workplace health and safety regulations, and helps employers comply with them. They do not cite or impose fines.

How to Adjust Your Equipment for a Better “Fit”

- ▶ **Make your chair and foot controls support your body.** If you can adjust your equipment for a comfortable position, many injuries can be prevented.
- ▶ **Adjustable chairs are needed to do this right.** If your chair is not adjustable, you still may be able to make a few of these changes.
- ▶ **Team up with a buddy.** Help each other to adjust your chairs and other equipment. It’s easy to see another person’s position. It’s hard to see your own!

1 Check the chair seat tilt. The seat should be level, or tilted forward (higher in the back) if you prefer.

2 Adjust the chair seat height for the comfort of your wrists, arms, neck and shoulders.

- Wrists should be straight
- Elbows close to your body
- Shoulders relaxed
- Head not bent over too far

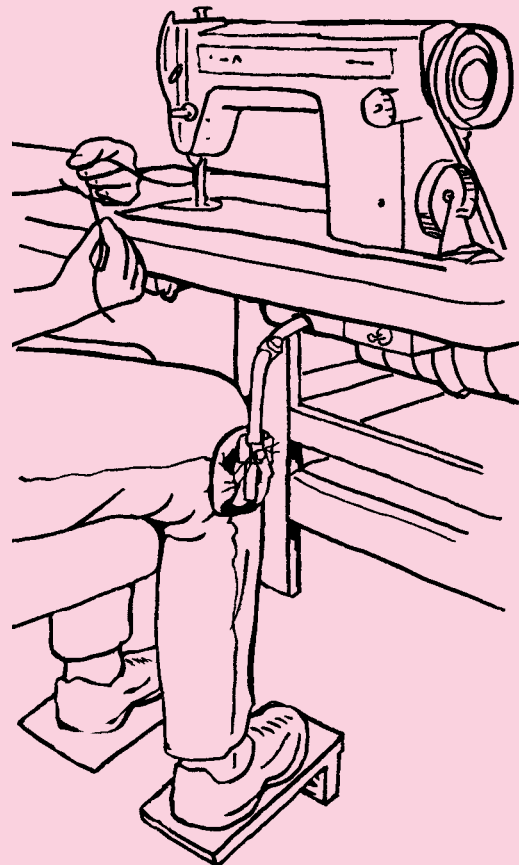
3 Next, support your feet for the comfort of your legs and back.

- Foot controls should be at a comfortable height and distance. Have them adjusted or altered.
- Feet that are not on a foot control can be raised using a foot rest.

4 Move your hips back in the chair.

5 Adjust the back rest to support your lower back.

6 Adjust or pad the knee control.



For More Information

- ▶ **HESIS (Hazard Evaluation System and Information Service)** www.dhs.ca.gov/ohb
HESIS answers questions about workplace hazards and has many free publications available.

For information on workplace hazards: (510) 622-4317. Please leave a message and your call will be returned.

For HESIS Publications: (510) 622-4328

Guide to Getting Medical Care for Job-Related Pain That Won't Go Away. Helps workers recognize symptoms that need treatment; choose a doctor; and work with health care providers, employers, and the workers' compensation system.

HESIS Publications List. Pamphlets and fact sheets on workplace hazards including chemicals, repetitive motion, and infectious diseases. Visit our website, call or write for the list. A guide for health care providers treating work-related musculoskeletal disorders is also available.

- ▶ **Workers' Compensation** If you are injured on the job, or work makes an existing injury worse, you may have a right to receive benefits such as medical care, wage replacement and retraining (if a job change is needed). Benefits are available to all workers, including immigrants, part-time, piece work and temporary workers. Call 1-800-736-7401 for more information and for free publications in English and Spanish:

Factsheet #1: *What Every Worker Should Know*

Factsheet #2: *After You Get Hurt on the Job*

- ▶ **Cal/OSHA Consultation Service** Helps employers to improve safety and health conditions without triggering enforcement inspections. Call 1-800-963-9424 for assistance or to ask for the booklet, *Easy Ergonomics*; or the booklet, *Fitting the Task to the Person: Ergonomics for Very Small Businesses*.

- ▶ **Other publications about ergonomics and safety in the garment industry**

Improving Working Conditions and Productivity in the Garment Industry, (ISBN# 922-110-849 X) from the International Labor Office, (301) 638-3152. \$19.95 plus shipping \$4.50.

Stop the Pain! A Workers' Guide to Job Design, from UNITE!, in English and Spanish (212) 691-1691. \$1.00

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The recommendations in this fact sheet were developed by HESIS based on our evaluation of research studies and published information, and on general ergonomic principles. They may not be appropriate for every sewing operation or individual worker.

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& INFORMATION SERVICE**

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