

Taking the pain out of office work

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Office work will become much less of a pain in the neck if Julie Côté has her way.

That's because this kinesiology researcher who teaches at McGill University is interested in finding ways to reduce or even prevent the kinds of muscular and skeletal stresses and pains that will affect one in ten office workers at some point in their careers. "Even though office workers may not naturally see it that way, their body is basically their work instrument, just as it is for an athlete," says Côté. "It can get injured in similar ways and for similar reasons: overuse of certain muscles." One of her current experiments involves looking at treadmill workstations. "These workstations may be good for getting people moving and losing weight," says Côté, "but no one has looked into how this kind of posture affects the muscles in the [neck](#), shoulders and lower back."

She and her fellow researchers asked experiment subjects to complete a 90-minute typing task while walking or sitting, while they measured [muscle](#) activity in the neck, shoulders, forearms, wrists and lower back. The researchers discovered that there was lower but more variable neck and shoulder muscle activity when subjects were walking compared with sitting, all of which translates into less discomfort. So treadmill work stations are potentially helpful in reducing the neck and shoulder muscle pain associated with computer work.

Athletes of the workplace

Côté developed an interest in doing research into muscle strain at a time when she was dealing with physical injuries caused by her own training schedule. She had been a serious middle distance (800 m) runner for over a decade, starting in her teens, running 100 km a week and feeling great about it. She had the speed and skill to move from the provincial level to the national and then on to international competition, becoming the National Junior Champion and representing Canada in the World Junior Championships in Bulgaria in 1990. In 1995, she went to the World University Games in Japan as part of the Canadian National University team, and a year later, she made a bid to become a member of the Canadian Olympic running team.

"It didn't work out, I started to develop all sorts of health problems and injuries," says Côté, pragmatically. "But I was gradually starting to get more interested in the research than I was in the running, my focus was changing." She had realized that she could help a lot of people by looking into the causes of neck and [shoulder pain](#), one of the most common complaints of office workers. "Whether you're a computer worker or a middle-distance runner, injuries happen when you tense a particular muscle or group of muscles for too long, and the blood can't flow into the region as it should and regenerate the muscles. Bodies are made to move." Her solution to reducing [muscle pain](#) for [office workers](#) is simple: minor movements and adjustments of position every few minutes.

Provided by McGill University

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