

Wellbeing at work (desk based)

The purpose of this educational piece is to reduce the risks associated with desk-based tasks.

The four main areas that pose the highest risk with this type of work are:

- 1.** Musculoskeletal (MSK) problems,
- 2.** Visual problems,
- 3.** Stress and fatigue
- 4.** Being too sedentary

Addressing these risk factors can also reduce the likelihood of you developing obesity, type II diabetes, and cardiovascular problems.



Musculoskeletal problems

Your body is designed to move, it is not designed to stay still for extended periods of time. Movement lubricates your joints and changes where your weight falls through your body.

As you move, your body releases natural oils into your joints, allowing them to move more easily. Staying still therefore can cause joint stiffness.

Being sedentary can also cause muscular aches and pains. Although it may not seem that way, sitting requires your postural muscles to be switched on. Extend this over a period of a working day or week, be it while sitting at your desk, in your car or on your sofa, these muscles are in constant use.

Imagine picking up a box. Holding this box for a few minutes is easy. But try holding this box all day. Your arms will ache!

Staying in one posture places your weight constantly through the same structures of your body. While your body is designed to take loads through it, it isn't designed to take these loads on the same area over long periods of time.

Pull your little finger back. Holding it in this position for a few minutes may feel ok, but hold it there for a whole day and it will start to hurt.

Just because you can't see these stresses like you can a skin cut, doesn't mean they do not exist.

Visual problems

Sitting at a desk for long periods of time can take its toll on your eyes. Looking at a computer focuses your vision on short distances. Your eyes focus by the use of muscles. Just like with any other muscle, these muscles become tired. This can lead to any number of symptoms including blurred vision, dry eyes and headaches.



Stress and fatigue

While your body is designed to have short bursts of stress which can help you to get a task done, stress over extended periods of time will have a detrimental affect on your body. Stress and fatigue at work can be caused by emotional factors, such as poor working relationships or work load (both too low and too high), and by physical factors such as prolonged pain.



Being too sedentary

This can be a challenging aspect of office work to improve. Being too sedentary is not only associated with musculoskeletal issues as noted, but also medical problems such as heart disease and more. This is the subject of a whole discussion in itself.

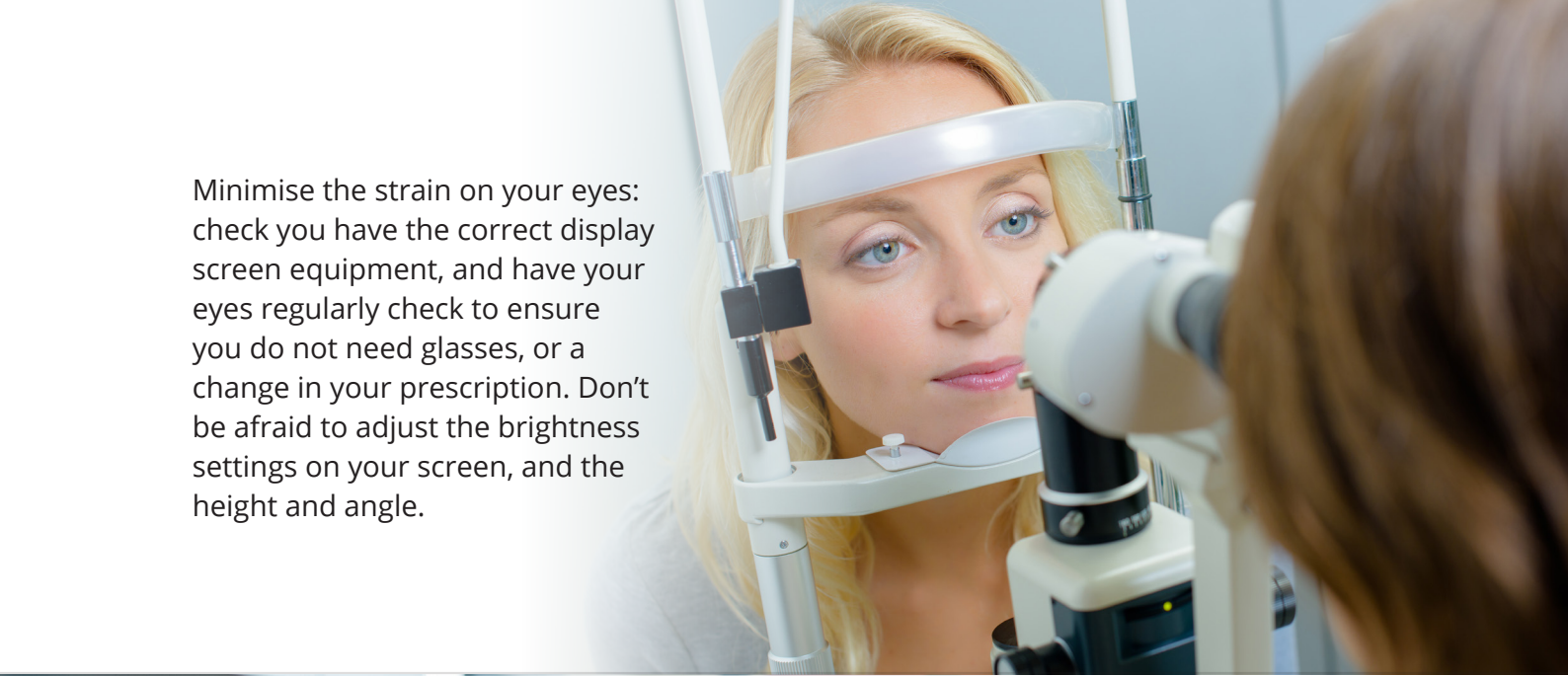
It may not seem that way, but all of these risk factors are linked together. For instance, poor vision can make you sit poorly causing back or neck pain which in turn causes stress.

What can I do?

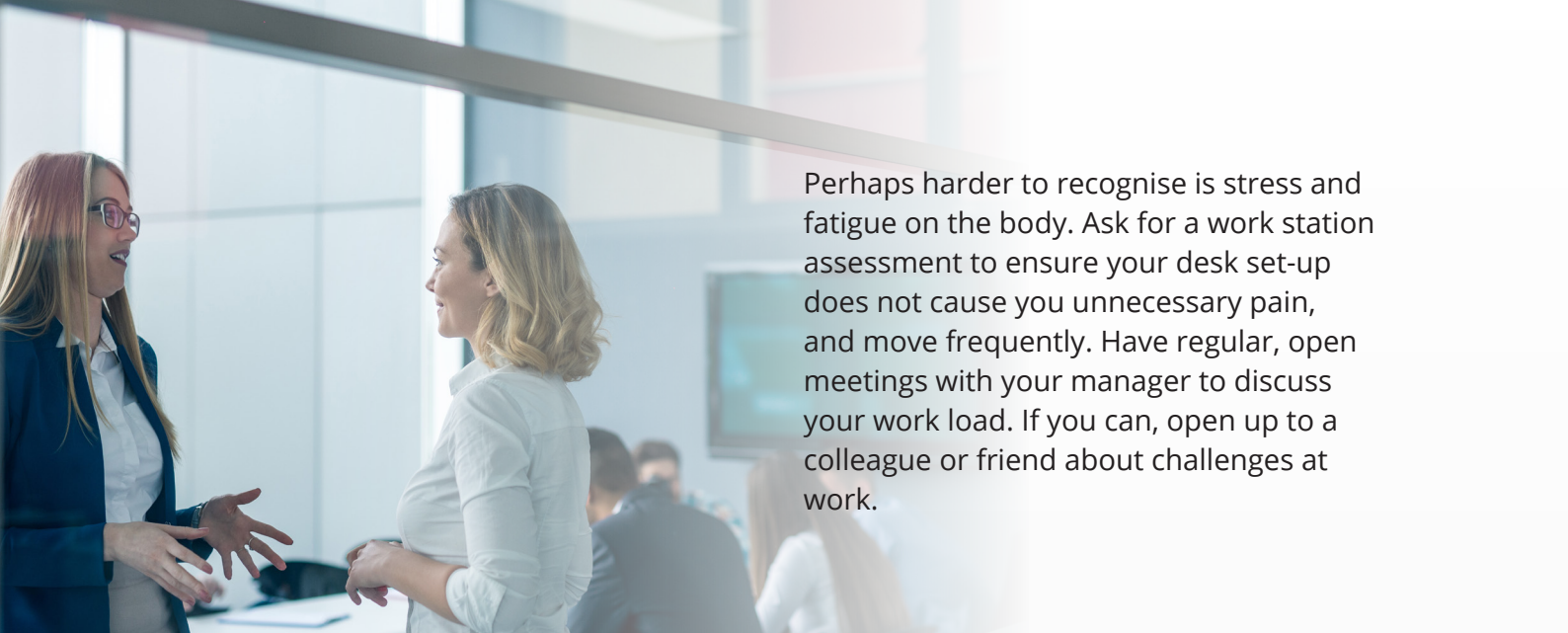
The first step you need to take is to realise that these risks are real, and unless you take action yourself, they will not go away. The second step is to recognise the early warning signs and 'nip them in the bud', rather than letting things escalate beyond your control.



When it comes to your joints and muscles, it is vital you move regularly. Whether this is by doing stretches at your desk, or simply getting up to make a drink, the aim is to do this before you become aware of any aches and pains. By the time you are aware of it, the damage has already begun. Guidelines say **for every 30 minutes spent sitting, 2 minutes should be spent moving**. The gist is, moving little and often is far better than one long mid morning break and one long mid afternoon break.



Minimise the strain on your eyes: check you have the correct display screen equipment, and have your eyes regularly checked to ensure you do not need glasses, or a change in your prescription. Don't be afraid to adjust the brightness settings on your screen, and the height and angle.



Perhaps harder to recognise is stress and fatigue on the body. Ask for a work station assessment to ensure your desk set-up does not cause you unnecessary pain, and move frequently. Have regular, open meetings with your manager to discuss your work load. If you can, open up to a colleague or friend about challenges at work.

“Your employer wants you to do a good job, and that means happy staff. Don't be afraid to speak up about any of these concerns.”