



# How to save your neck

## TIPS FOR A NECK-FRIENDLY ERGONOMIC WORKSTATION

For me, 2023 was the year of neck pain. It started in late December or early January and got worse. I had constant pain on the left side of my neck, and I often had what seemed like referred pain, which I felt in the middle of my left scapula. It was not crippling, but it was constant. By March, my daily routine had me coming home from work and lying on my bed for a couple hours, just to let it subside.

I knew that the likely cause of the problem was the way I had my workstation – my desk, desk chair, and computer monitors – set up. I had a 20-year-old Aeron chair, a computer station at my desk that allowed me to raise or lower the part that supported the keyboard, and three monitors. Two of those monitors were directly in front of me and were turned vertically (portrait mode) so that I could display an entire page of text at once in a normal-sized font. The third monitor was to my right, and it was set to display horizontally (landscape mode). I used that one for email and my calendar, which I looked at a lot.

By March, the pain was so constant and so distracting that I went to a chiropractor. The first adjustment eliminated about 90 percent of my pain. The second one a few days later took care of the rest. After three months of constant pain, I felt great! I was so pleased I signed up for a 90-day treatment plan that was supposed to keep me feeling good.

The pain returned about 30 days later and was worse than before. This time, an adjustment would sometimes make it go away for a few hours, and sometimes would not provide any relief at all. I kept going to the chiropractor for the rest of my 90-day plan, and the pain was no better.

And I could feel the pain worsen as I sat at my desk and tried to work. I suspected that my workstation was the culprit. I did a Google search for “ergonomic consultant” and found one who was near my office. She charged me \$250 to come to my office, inspect my workstation arrangement, and make recommendations.

Even though I knew that my setup was causing the problem, I thought that I had

set myself up in a proper ergonomic fashion. I had even purchased a three-inch shelf to raise each of my monitors, so I had less need to look down. I was fearful that the consultant would come to my office and tell me, “Well, you have everything set up correctly. There is nothing I can do for you.”

I had little to fear. When she arrived, she told me that every client she visits has done what I did – go online and look up the proper way to set up a workstation – and that they *always* get it wrong. Always.

These were her main recommendations:

1. The vertical monitors had to go. They were causing me to constantly look up and down as I typed. By going back to horizontal monitors, I could use my eyes to see the text, without having to tilt my head (and neck) up and down. It was a pain to lose the ability to display an entire page of text at once, but I bit the bullet.
2. The third horizontal monitor had to go. It was really convenient to have a monitor dedicated solely to email and my calendar, but it meant that I was constantly looking to the right, and twisting my neck to do so. From now on, I'd have to do what most folks do, toggle between looking at Outlook and at my documents on the same monitor.
3. I needed to buy adjustable arms that allowed me to place the two monitors I was using at the right location relative to my face. There are a variety of arms for this job. The consultant recommended a pair that she thought were well made and worked well. They cost about \$250.
4. The two monitors were positioned in a gradual “V” shape, with the interior edges directly in front of my nose. When I sit and look at the screen, my focus point should be about four inches below the top bezel of the monitors.
5. She raised the armrests on my chair so that, when I sat in the proper position, they would support my elbows and forearms. The armrests were set to the same height as the keyboard shelf.
6. She changed the height of the keyboard shelf and of my chair. The point was to have me able to sit with my feet on

the floor, my eyes focused on the right spot on the monitors, with my forearms at a 90-degree angle from my upper arms. In other words, I needed to be able to sit so that I was not reaching forward toward my keyboard. Instead, my upper arms should be at my sides, and my forearms should be at a 90-degree angle, with my fingertips coming to rest directly on the home keys of my keyboard.

Once she made these changes, I could feel the pain in my neck start to subside. Within a week, it was gone. I was thrilled. And once again, I was pain free for about a month, and then the pain returned.

I called my consultant again and she came out for a second visit. This time, the issue was my chair. She recommended that I replace my Aeron chair, which lacked a headrest, with a new ergonomic chair that had a headrest. (She had made this suggestion at the initial visit, but since I improved so quickly after that visit without replacing my chair, I didn't think it was necessary.) I went chair shopping and was not terribly impressed. The chairs seemed to fall into two categories: (1) chairs that were less comfortable than my Aeron; or (2) chairs that were as comfortable as my Aeron. Nothing was more comfortable than the chair I already had.

But I needed a headrest. I looked online to see whether it was possible to attach an after-market headrest to my Aeron chair. It turned out there are after-market headrests. And they look like they were made by Herman Miller from the same material as the Aeron chair itself. They are not cheap – about \$200. But that is still easily \$1,000 less than a new chair.


Feeling pleased with myself, I emailed the consultant and told her that I'd found a headrest attachment for my Aeron. She was not impressed. She told me that she was aware of them, and she didn't recommend them. But since I'd already ordered it, I figured I'd try it when it came.

Attaching it was easy and I sent her photos of how I sat with the headrest

attached. She said that it seemed to be working for me. My experience was that the headrest did not actually support my head or neck. Rather, it was more like having a tennis ball hung on a string in your garage, so that it hits your windshield when you have pulled in the right amount. The headrest gave me a physical reminder of where my head should be when I am sitting in the right position. If I am not feeling contact between the back of my head and the headrest, I am likely sitting in a way that will hurt my neck.

As soon as I got the headrest, the pain went away again. And so far, (knock on wood), it's stayed gone. I miss my vertical monitors, but giving them up was worth it to have the pain go away. There are many ergonomic consultants out there, but if you want to contact my consultant, her name is Karen Loesing, and her email address is Karen@theergonomicexpert.com. She knows her stuff and she really helped me.

No matter who you call, I'd urge you to fix your workstation now, before you have your own year of neck pain.

*Jeffrey I. Ehrlich is the principal of the Ehrlich Law Firm in Claremont. He is a cum laude graduate of the Harvard Law School, an appellate specialist certified by the California Board of Legal Specialization, and an emeritus member of the CAALA Board of Governors. He is the editor-in-chief of Advocate magazine, a two-time recipient of the CAALA Appellate Attorney of the Year award, and in 2019 received CAOC's Streetfighter of the Year award. Orange County Trial Lawyers awarded him the "Top Gun" Distinguished Achievement Award in 2023. *