

Reduce the strain on muscles for National Road Safety Week

Being a road user comes with a whole list of inherent risks ? fast-moving vehicles, distracted drivers and inattentive pedestrians are only a few of the hazards one may encounter while in transit. But what about the dangers people pose to themselves? For this year's National Road Safety Week (May 17 to 23), the Canada Safety Council wants to remind Canadians of the importance of proper ergonomics behind the wheel. Developing a musculoskeletal or repetitive strain injury is much easier than it would appear, and these can in fact leave people at a higher risk for car crashes.

According to SAFE Work Manitoba, more than 50 per cent of on-the-job injuries to people who drive for a living are musculoskeletal injuries (MSI). And while a significant amount of this statistic can be linked to heightened exposure ? a professional driver will, out of necessity, have more opportunity to have their posture negatively impact their health ? it's still an injury risk that can be mitigated by taking steps to reduce the strain on the body.

A significant factor in injury is when a driver maintains a posture that causes them to reach forward or forces them to use awkward motions to control the vehicle. Additionally, in larger vehicles, the full-body vibration over a prolonged period of time can heighten the risk of injury to the lower back and spine.

Additionally, prolonged sessions at the wheel can fatigue the back muscles and weaken them, which makes them more vulnerable to injury than when they are not fatigued.

Here are some steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of injury:

? Maintain a proper posture while seated, ensuring that the knees and hips are level and that you can reach the pedals and instruments without having to come away from the back of the seat.

? Aim to have the seat inclined at between 110-120 degrees, which will reduce the pressure on the discs in your back.

? If your vehicle is equipped with a lumbar support, adjust it so your back is evenly supported.

? The steering wheel should be close enough to you and low enough that you don't have to strain your neck and upper back by reaching.

? Before removing any heavy items from the trunk or the back of the truck, give your body a few minutes to adjust to being out of the vehicle. Perform a few stretches to limber up.

? Where possible, break up your driving. Take small breaks every two hours or so ? it's better to arrive at your destination on time and well than to get there early, but in pain and stiff.

What if you already suffer from a MSI, though? According to the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, public health research has shown that these individuals are at a higher risk for car crashes than those who do not suffer from these injuries.

Although more empirical research needs to be conducted into the field, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.