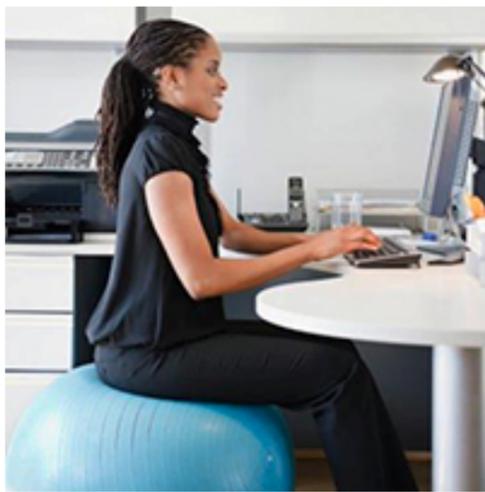


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How to Retrofit Your Workspace With Ankylosing Spondylitis

By Beth W. Orenstein | Medically approved by Farrokh Sohrabi, MD

Make "no slouching" your office mantra. Then take these steps to arrange your workspace to minimize pain.



Ouch! When you have ankylosing spondylitis (AS), it can hurt just to sit. And that can make your job a lot more taxing than it needs to be. But by making some simple adjustments to your workspace, AS and office hours don't have to be at odds with each other.

Start at the Top

Depending on the extent of the AS workspace retrofit you need, your first stop might be your boss's office. How do you do that? David G. Borenstein, MD, clinical professor of rheumatology at George Washington University Spine Center in D.C. and an expert on ergonomics and pain, suggested laying it on the line: "Tell your boss, 'It's in your best interest to have a worker who can concentrate on his job versus his aches and pains.'"

If you run into any issues, you may need to get the support of your human resources manager, an occupational health adviser, or your union representative. You can point out that you may qualify for accommodations under the American with Disabilities Act. (The act makes it illegal for your employer to discriminate against you.)

Retrofit Your Workspace With Ankylosing Spondylitis

Here's another argument in your favor: The accommodations for ankylosing spondylitis at work don't have to be costly or difficult.

Here are seven simple accommodations that should make coping with ankylosing spondylitis at the office easier.

1. **Keep your keyboard close.** "You don't want to reach toward your keyboard," said Marianne Ryan, PT, OCS, clinical director of MRPT Physical Therapy in New York City and a spokeswoman for the American Physical Therapy Association. Ask for a desk with a keyboard tray so that you don't have to extend your reach. You want to be able to keep your elbows close to your body.

2. **Talk on a headset.** You'll strain your neck and spine if you cradle the telephone between your ear and your shoulder. A headset will allow you to keep your head facing forward when talking on the phone.
3. **Use a document holder.** You'll put less strain on your spine if you're not bending over to see your materials. "Everything should be at eye level or just slightly below," Ryan advised.
4. **Ask for a firm chair.** The ideal chair at work will have a firm seat and an upright, firm back. Adjust the chair height so that you are able to keep your knees and hip joints at a right angle. Chairs that are upholstered or too soft will encourage bad posture and can increase your pain.
5. **Get a small pillow.** "I recommend a wedge-shaped pillow — something soft to lean up against," Ryan said. Place it behind your back. It will help you to sit up straight. The pillow also can absorb the blow of your lower back stiffness — which is a symptom of ankylosing spondylitis.
6. **Try a footstool.** If you support your feet when you're sitting, your back won't tighten up so much, Ryan explained.
7. **Request proper lighting.** If your workspace is well lit, you won't run the risk of eyestrain. On the other hand, if your workspace is dimly lit, you're likely to lean forward and hunch over your keyboard, and hunching over is one of the worst things you can do, said Eric Robertson, PT, DPT, OCS, an assistant professor of physical therapy at Regis University in Denver and spokesman for the American Physical Therapy Association.

More Office Accommodations for Ankylosing Spondylitis

Here are other steps you can take to make managing AS while at work easier on you:

- **Face front.** Make sure your workspace is designed so that you're always facing what you're doing. "You wouldn't believe how many people have their computer monitor to the side," said Dr. Borenstein. Having to twist can put more stress on your neck and spine.
- **Take frequent breaks.** "People with ankylosing spondylitis crave motion," said Robertson. Every 20 minutes is ideal, but get up at least once an hour and move, if only for a few minutes.
- **Deputize a few watchdogs.** Tell your co-workers it's okay to nudge you if they see you slouching. It's that important that you sit straight — posture can be a big part of your AS management.

In fact, when you have AS, the better your posture, the better you'll feel. And the more that your workspace is retrofitted to encourage you to sit straight, the better off you'll be. You spend a good deal of your day at work, so make paying attention to your posture part of your job.

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