

DESK BACK RESCUE

10-Minute Routines That Actually Work

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01

Why Your Back Hurts After a Day at the Desk

If your neck, shoulders or lower back ache by the end of a working day, you are not doing anything wrong and your body is not failing. Bodies are built for varied movement, and a desk job asks them to hold still for most of the day. This chapter explains what that stillness does, helps you recognise your own pain pattern, and shows you how to start the routines in this book safely.

What Eight Hours of Sitting Does to Your Body

It is 3 pm. You have been answering emails since half past eight, with a short lunch eaten at the keyboard. Your neck feels tight at the base of the skull, there is a dull band across the top of your shoulders, and when you finally stand up for a coffee, your lower back takes a few steps to straighten out. Nothing happened. You did not lift anything or twist awkwardly. You simply sat.



Figure 1.1: Long hours at a laptop often end with tension in the neck and shoulders.

That "nothing happened" is exactly the point. Sitting is not harmful in itself, and no single posture is to blame. The trouble comes from holding one position for hours without a break, so the same muscles and joints carry the same load all day long.

Static load

The work a muscle does to hold a body part still in one position, as opposed to moving it. A static load can be small, but because it never switches off, the muscle gets no chance to rest and refill with fresh blood.

Try a simple experiment. Hold one arm straight out in front of you, elbow slightly bent, as if resting it on an invisible table. For the first minute it feels easy. After five minutes the shoulder starts to complain. After twenty, most people are desperate to put it down, even though the arm weighs no more than it did at the start. Nothing is injured; the muscle is simply tired of doing the same job without a pause. Your neck does something similar every day, holding up your head as it leans slightly towards the screen, and the muscles of your back and hips do the same around your spine and pelvis.

Posture fatigue

The ache, stiffness or heaviness that builds up when a position is held for too long. It is a signal to move, not a sign of damage, and it usually eases once you change position or get up and walk.

Muscles and joints like to be loaded and then released. Movement pumps blood through the tissues, shifts fluid in and out of the joints and gives each muscle a turn at working and resting. When you sit still, that cycle slows down. The front of your hips stays folded, your chest stays slightly closed as your hands reach for the keyboard, and the deep muscles that steady your neck and lower back hand the job over to larger muscles that tire more quickly.

How you set up your desk also seems to matter. A cross-sectional study of 60 administrative workers at a financial institution assessed their workstations with a standard ergonomic tool and asked them about their symptoms. Complaints were common, mainly in the lower back, neck and arms, and higher ergonomic risk was linked to more symptoms. The researchers also concluded that working from home without a suitable set-up is a relevant risk factor. One study of one group of workers cannot tell us how every office will behave, but it fits with what physiotherapists see in practice: the set-up and the amount of movement in a day both play a part.

Stillness, not posture, is the main problem

There is no perfect sitting position that will keep you comfortable for eight hours. The most useful change is to vary your position and to move often. The routines in this book give those movement breaks a clear purpose.

Your Office Day, Hour by Hour

To see where the load builds, follow an ordinary working day from the moment you leave home. You may recognise most of it.

7:30, the commute. The day starts sitting down, in a car seat, on a bus or on a crowded train. If you stand, you may be holding a rail with one arm raised while your phone is in the other hand, head tilted down. By the time you arrive, your hips have been bent for half an hour or more and your neck has spent much of that time looking down at a small screen.

9:00, the cheap chair. Many office chairs offer little support for the lower back, a seat that is too deep or too high, and armrests that bump into the desk. To reach the keyboard, you slide forward and slump into the backrest, or you perch on the front edge and lean in. Either way, the lower back loses its natural curve and the muscles around it settle into a long, low-level effort.

11:00, the open-plan desk. The screen sits a little too low, so your head drifts forward to read it. Phones ring, colleagues pass behind you, and you keep half an eye on the room. Shoulders creep upwards. A shoulder held slightly raised for a whole morning is one of the most common sources of that heavy, burning band across the top of the back.

14:00, the long call. After lunch comes a run of video calls. You sit still to stay in the camera frame, and you may lean on one elbow or cross the same leg for an hour. One side of the body ends up carrying more than the other.

19:30, the kitchen table. At home, you open the laptop to finish a report. Laptops put the screen and keyboard in one place, so either your hands are comfortable and your head is bent, or the screen is at eye level and your arms are lifted. The kitchen chair has no lumbar support, and you are tired, so you slump. Then you move to the sofa and look down at your phone.

Adding up the day

Count the hours in the example above: around an hour of commuting, seven or eight at the desk, and an hour or two at the kitchen table or on the sofa. That can add up to ten hours or more spent in a few similar shapes: head forward, shoulders raised, hips bent and the lower back rounded. None of these positions is dangerous on its own. The issue is that the day rarely gives any of them a break.

Notice that the load gathers in four places: the neck, the shoulders, the hips and the lower back. They are connected. A head that drifts forward pulls the upper back into a rounder shape, which encourages the shoulders to lift. Hips that stay bent tend to tip the pelvis back, flattening the lower back. The four exercises in Chapter 2 are chosen to answer these four areas, and the workstation changes in Chapter 3 reduce how hard each of them has to work in the first place.

Where It Hurts and What It Usually Means

Most desk-related aches follow recognisable patterns. The table below links common areas of discomfort with habits that often contribute to them and with the exercise in this book that is most likely to help. Use it as a starting point for your own routine, not as a diagnosis. Pain has many possible causes, and only a professional who examines you can tell you what is going on in your case.

Table 1.1: Self-check: common desk pain patterns

Where you feel it	Habits that often contribute	Where to start in this book
Back of the neck, base of the skull	Screen too low, head pushed forward, looking down at a phone or laptop	Chin tucks (Chapter 2); raise the screen (Chapter 3)
Top of the shoulders, between the shoulder blades	Shoulders hunched, keyboard or mouse too far away, armrests too high or too low	Seated cat-cow (Chapter 2); keyboard and mouse closer (Chapter 3)
Middle back stiffness	Long hours slumped in one shape, little twisting or arching during the day	Seated cat-cow (Chapter 2); regular position changes (Chapter 3)
Lower back ache on standing up	Hips stuck in a bent position for hours, seat too low or too deep	Standing hip flexor stretch (Chapter 2); seat height and footrest (Chapter 3)
Lower back that tires while sitting	Slumping into a chair with no lower-back support, buttock muscles inactive	Glute bridges (Chapter 2); rolled towel for support (Chapter 3)

Many people tick more than one row. That is normal, because the areas influence one another, and it is the reason the routine in Chapter 2 works through all four movements in one sequence instead of treating each spot in isolation.

Some patterns do not belong in this table. Pain that spreads down an arm or leg, pins and needles, numbness, or weakness are different from posture fatigue and need a professional opinion. So does pain that wakes you at night or keeps getting worse. Chapter 4 lists these warning signs in full.

A two-minute self-check

At the end of today, note in one line where you ached most and at what time it started. Do the same tomorrow. After a few days, you will usually see a pattern, such as the neck tightening after long calls or the lower back stiffening after the commute, and you will know which exercise to prioritise.

How to Use This Book Safely

The exercises in this book are gentle, but any new movement deserves a careful start. Take it more slowly, and check with your doctor or a physiotherapist before you begin, if you have had recent surgery or a recent injury, if you are pregnant or have recently given birth, if you have a diagnosed condition of the spine or joints, or if your pain is already severe.

It helps to know what normal exercise discomfort feels like. A mild stretch, a sense of muscles working, or a slight ache in a muscle the next day are all expected, especially in the first week. These feelings should be moderate and should settle within a day or two. Stop signals feel different.

⚠ Stop the exercise if you feel

Sharp, stabbing or burning pain; pain that shoots into an arm or leg; tingling, pins and needles or numbness; dizziness or a new headache; or pain that is clearly worse after the exercise than before it. Stop that movement, rest, and check the red flags in Chapter 4. Do not push through sharp pain in the hope that it will loosen up.

Start with the easier option on each exercise card and move to the standard version once it feels comfortable. Change one thing at a time, so that if something does not suit you, you know what caused it. The 4-week plan in Chapter 4 builds the routine up gradually for exactly this reason.

This book is for education only and is not a replacement for individual medical advice. It cannot examine you or take your history into account. If you are unsure whether an exercise is right for you, ask your doctor or a physiotherapist.

☑ Before you start

- ☐ Remember that the main problem is stillness, so aim to change position often
- ☐ Note where you ache most and at what time of day it starts
- ☐ Find your starting exercise in the self-check table
- ☐ Know the stop signals: sharp, shooting or burning pain, tingling, numbness or dizziness
- ☐ Read the red flags in Chapter 4 once before you begin
- ☐ Start with the easier option on each card

Do this today: Stand up and walk for one minute every time you finish a call or a meeting.

02

The 10-Minute Desk Routine

It is 3 pm. Your neck feels like a bolt that someone has tightened one turn too far, the next meeting starts in twelve minutes, and the commute home is another fifty minutes of sitting. You do not need a gym or a change of clothes for what comes next. You need a chair, a bit of floor space, and ten minutes.

This chapter gives you four moves. Each one answers a specific shape that sitting locks you into: the head that drifts forward, the spine that stays rounded, the hips that stay bent, and the buttock muscles that go quiet. We show each move as a repeatable card, so you can look at it once, learn it, and then run it without the book.

How to read the exercise cards

Every card has the same layout: purpose, set-up, numbered steps, breathing, the most common mistake, and the dose. Learn one card at a time. Do not try to master all four on the first day; two cards done well beat four done carelessly.

A word on effort before we start. Every move here should feel like a stretch, a gentle muscle effort, or mild work. It should never feel sharp, hot, pinching, or like pain shooting into an arm or leg. If it does, stop that move and read the red-flags section in Chapter 4.

Chin Tucks for a Tired Neck

Purpose. The head weighs roughly as much as a bowling ball, and at a screen it tends to creep forward of the shoulders. The muscles at the back of the neck then work overtime to hold it, while the deep muscles at the front of the neck go to sleep. The chin tuck wakes those deep front muscles and eases the strain behind. A randomised trial in 65 school teachers with neck pain, whose daily routine involves long head-down postures, found that adding training of these deep neck flexor muscles to conventional exercises gave larger improvements in pain, disability and muscle endurance than conventional exercises alone. Teachers are not office workers, so we cite this as support for the idea, not as proof of this exact routine.

Set-up. Sit on the front half of your chair with your feet flat on the floor, hip-width apart. Let your arms hang or rest your hands on your thighs. Look straight ahead at a point on the wall at eye level. Your ribcage sits over your pelvis, not tipped back against the chair.

1. Start with your head in a comfortable, neutral position, ears roughly above your shoulders.

2. Keeping your eyes level, imagine a string gently drawing the back of your head away from your shoulders, and glide your head straight backwards, as if making a double chin.
3. Feel a long stretch at the base of your skull and a light effort at the front of your throat. The movement is small, about 1–2 cm (under an inch).
4. Hold for 5 seconds, keeping your jaw relaxed and your tongue resting on the roof of your mouth.
5. Release slowly back to neutral. Pause for a breath, then repeat.

Breathing. Breathe in through your nose as you prepare. Breathe out slowly as you glide the head back, and keep breathing normally during the hold. Do not hold your breath; a held breath tightens the neck and shoulders, which is the opposite of what you want.

⚠ Most common mistake: lifting the chin

Most people let the chin tilt up or drop down as they pull back, which turns a chin tuck into a nod. Your eyes must stay level the whole time. A simple check: place a finger on your chin and push straight back along a horizontal line, as if sliding the head along a rail. If your nose points up at the ceiling, you have lifted the chin; start again with a smaller movement.

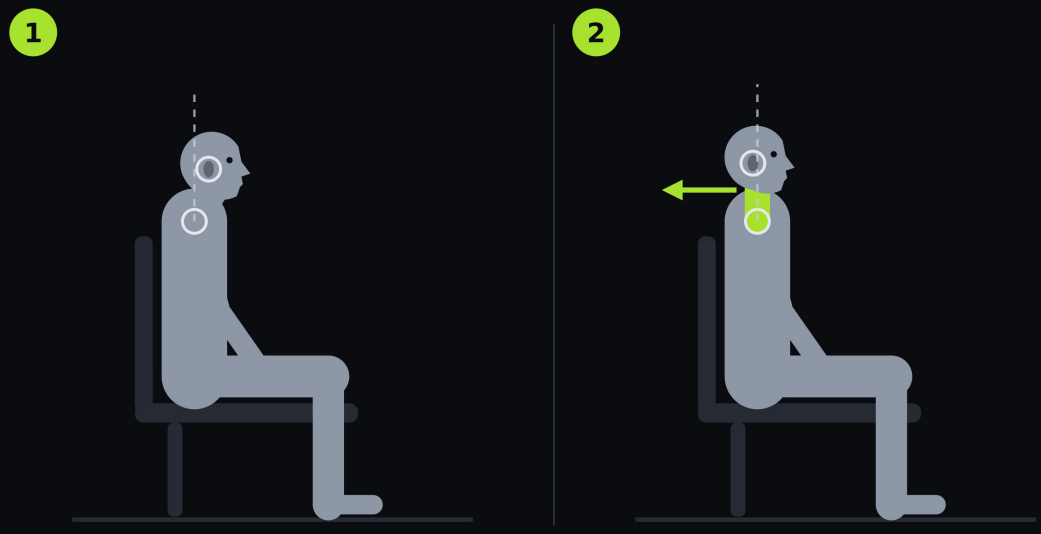


Figure 2.1: Seated chin tuck, side view. 1 — start: sitting tall in the chair with the spine upright, feet flat and hands on thighs, and the head poking forward so the ear sits ahead of the shoulder line. 2 — end: the chin glides straight back on a level line with the eyes forward, lengthening the back of the neck and working the deep neck muscles at the front of the throat, until the ear stacks directly over the shoulder.

Dose. Ten repetitions with a 5-second hold, once per session. Aim for two sessions on a working day. Moves are small, so the effort builds slowly; a light tiredness at the front of the neck afterwards is normal.

Easier option. Reduce the hold to 2–3 seconds and the range to a gentle nod-back. If you feel tension in the jaw, rest a fingertip lightly on your chin to guide the line of movement and stop the jaw from clenching.

Harder option. Do the same movement lying on your back on the floor or a firm bed with a thin folded towel under the back of your head. Tuck the chin, and lift your head about one finger-width off the towel for a 5-second hold. Stop if you feel strain at the front of the throat or a headache starts.

Desk-friendly variation

Do chin tucks while reading a long email or waiting for a call to connect. Nobody can see them, and each one takes about five seconds. Pair them with a habit you already have, such as every time you take a sip of water.

Seated Cat-Cow for a Stiff Spine

Purpose. Hours in a chair freeze the spine in one gently rounded shape. Seated cat-cow moves the whole spine, from the base to the neck, through a smooth, comfortable range, in both directions. It is a mobility drill, not a stretch to the limit. Think of it as oiling a hinge that has gone stiff.

Many people have been told to "sit up straight" and to stay there. That advice misses the point. The spine copes best with variety, and any one position, even a good one, becomes tiring if it is held for hours. This exercise gives your back a reason to change position.

Set-up. Choose an ordinary office chair without armrests getting in the way, or pull the chair out so your arms can move. Sit near the front edge with your feet flat on the floor, hip-width apart, knees roughly above your ankles. Rest your hands on your thighs. Find your neutral spine: not slumped, not stiffly upright, just tall and relaxed.

1. Start in neutral, with a small natural curve in your lower back and your head level.
2. **Cow (arch).** As you breathe in, gently roll your pelvis forward so your sit bones tilt backwards, let your chest lift and your shoulder blades slide together. Your gaze moves slightly upward. Stop when you feel a comfortable opening across the front of the chest.
3. Pause for a moment at the top of the movement.
4. **Cat (round).** As you breathe out, tuck your pelvis under, round the lower back, then the middle back, and let your chin drop towards your chest. Press your hands lightly into your thighs and feel the space between your shoulder blades widen.
5. Return smoothly through neutral to the next arch. Make the movement slow and continuous, like a wave moving up the spine.

Breathing. In for the arch, out for the round. One full breath cycle per movement is a good pace, roughly 4 seconds in each direction. If you lose the rhythm, slow down; the breathing sets the speed, not the other way round.

Most common mistake: forcing the range

People tend to haul the spine as far as it will go in each direction, treating more movement as better. That can pinch the lower back or strain the neck. Aim for roughly half your maximum range. The movement should feel easy and pleasant, and you should be able to talk normally while doing it.

Dose. Eight to ten slow cycles. A full set takes about one minute. Repeat once or twice a day, or whenever you notice your back feeling stuck.

What to avoid. Do not do this on a chair that tips, swivels freely, or has wheels you cannot lock; pushing against a rolling chair is how people end up on the floor. Do not let your feet slide forward. If a movement into the arch causes a pinch in the lower back, shrink the range or skip the arch and do only the gentle rounding. If any movement sends pain, tingling or numbness into a leg or arm, stop and read the red-flags section.

Easier option. Move only the lower back: tilt the pelvis forward and back, keeping the chest and head still. Make it small and slow.

Harder option. Add the arms. Raise your arms slightly forward and wide as you arch, then hug yourself gently as you round. Keep the pace slow.

Make it a signal, not a chore

Do a round of cat-cow every time you stand up from a call. Your body begins to associate "end of meeting" with "reset the spine", and you stop having to remember.

Standing Hip Flexor Stretch

Purpose. When you sit, the muscles at the front of your hips stay folded and short for hours. Stand up after a long meeting and they can pull your pelvis forward and tip the lower back into an exaggerated arch, so your back tightens as you stand. This stretch lengthens those front-of-hip muscles so your pelvis can sit in a more comfortable position. It is one of the simplest ways to ease that stiff, bent-over feeling when you first stand.

Research on hip and glute function supports the link between sitting and the hips. A paper on hip muscle activation describes how prolonged sitting can shorten and tighten the muscles at the front of the hip while the buttock muscles in the back lengthen and weaken. That is a proposed mechanism in a research paper, not a guarantee of what happens to you, but it matches what most of us feel after a long day in a chair.

Stance. Stand next to your desk, with one hand resting on the desk edge or the back of a sturdy chair for balance. Take a long step back with one foot, as if you were starting a lunge. Your front knee is bent, your back leg is fairly straight, and the heel of the back foot may lift off the floor. Both hips face forward.

1. Stand tall with your hand on the support. Step the right foot back about a stride length. Keep your toes pointing forward.
2. Bend the front (left) knee slightly, so your weight moves forward.
3. Tuck your pelvis gently under, as if you were tucking a tail between your legs. Squeeze the buttock of the back leg lightly.
4. Keeping your chest tall, shift your hips slightly forward until you feel a stretch at the front of the hip and top of the thigh of the back leg.
5. Hold, breathing steadily, then step the foot back to the start and repeat on the other side.

Breathing. Breathe slowly and evenly into the belly. With each breath out, allow the stretch to deepen by a very small amount, but never force it. Holding your breath tightens the very muscles you are trying to release.

⚠ Most common mistake: arching the lower back

The most common error is to push the hips forward by arching the lower back, which feels like a stretch but only collapses the spine and leaves the hip muscles untouched. Fix it with the pelvic tuck in step three: the stretch should appear at the front of the hip, not as a pinch in the small of the back. If you feel your back doing the work, shorten the stride and tuck harder.

Hold times and dose. Hold for 30 seconds on each side. Repeat twice per side. The whole sequence takes about two minutes. The stretch should be a moderate, pulling sensation that eases as you hold; it should not be sharp.

Desk-edge support option. If balance is a concern, place one hand on the desk and the other on your hip. Keep the desk close enough that you do not have to lean on it. Stand next to a wall instead if your desk is on wheels or is not sturdy. Never lean on a rolling chair.

Easier option. Shorten the stride, keep the back heel on the floor, and hold for 15–20 seconds.

Harder option. Raise the arm on the same side as the back leg overhead and lean gently away from the stretching leg. This adds a stretch along the side of the body. Only do this if the basic version feels comfortable.

💡 Fit it into the day

Do this one while the kettle boils or while a large file downloads. Thirty seconds on each side fits into most of the small waiting gaps in an office day.

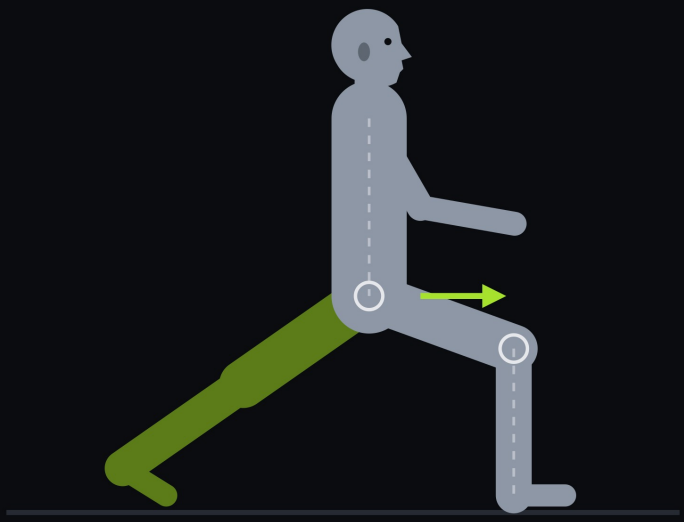


Figure 2.2: Standing hip flexor stretch: long lunge with the back heel raised, front knee over the ankle, spine upright and pelvis gently tucked under as the hips shift slightly forward; the stretched back leg is highlighted, felt mainly at the front of the hip and thigh. Rest a hand on your desk for balance if needed.

Glute Bridges at Home

Purpose. The buttock (gluteal) muscles help hold the pelvis steady and share the load with the lower back. Sitting on them all day tends to switch them off, and then the lower back picks up the slack. The glute bridge wakes them up. It is best done at home on a mat, a rug, or a carpeted floor in the evening, since it needs lying down.

Studies of hip muscle activity point to bridging as an effective way to engage these muscles. One electromyography study of single-leg bridge positions in 28 healthy young adults found that a modified position with the knee bent a little further reduced hamstring activity while keeping gluteal activity high. That was a laboratory study in healthy people, and the single-leg version is much harder than the one below, so treat it as background, not as a promise.

Floor set-up. Lie on your back on a mat or rug. Bend your knees and place your feet flat on the floor, hip-width apart, with your heels about a hand's length from your buttocks. Rest your arms by your sides, palms down. Let your lower back settle into a natural, small curve.

1. Tuck your pelvis slightly, so the lower back flattens a little towards the floor. This is your starting position.
2. Press through your heels and squeeze your buttocks together.

3. Lift your hips until your body forms a straight line from shoulders to knees. Stop there; do not lift higher.
4. Hold for 2 seconds, squeezing the buttocks, with ribs relaxed and knees pointing straight ahead.
5. Lower slowly, one section of the spine at a time, until your buttocks touch the floor. Pause, then repeat.

Breathing. Breathe in at the bottom. Breathe out as you lift and squeeze. Breathe normally during the hold. Out on effort is the rule that keeps you from straining.

> ⚠ **Most common form error: pushing through the back**
>
> When the buttocks are sleepy, the lower back takes over, and you end up arching high with the ribs flaring and a pinch at the base of the spine. Your hamstrings, the muscles at the back of the thigh, may also cramp. Stop the lift at a straight line, keep the ribs down, and think about squeezing the buttocks to do the work. If the back or hamstrings burn before the buttocks do, move your feet a little closer to your body.

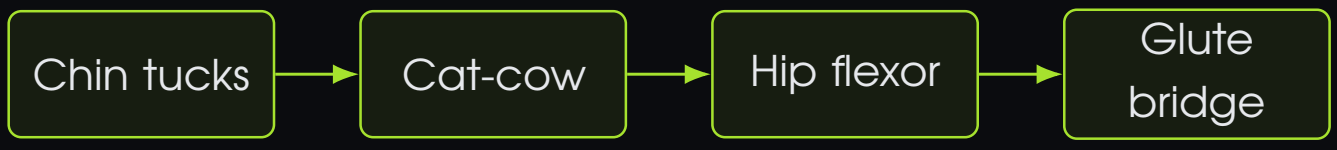
Reps and sets. Ten repetitions, with a 2-second hold at the top. Do two sets with a 30-second rest between them. Total time about three minutes. You should feel a pleasant working tiredness in the buttocks, not in the lower back.

Easier version. Skip the hold and lift only partway, so the movement is a small hip rise. Do eight repetitions.

Harder version. Extend one knee straight and do the bridge with a single supporting leg, keeping the pelvis level. Start with only three or four repetitions per side. Only try this once the standard bridge feels easy and clean.

Putting It Together in Ten Minutes

Four moves are useful; a sequence you actually run is better. The flow below links them into one ten-minute block. Notice that it starts with the gentlest movements and ends with the most demanding, which is how a good warm-up is built.



Allow a few seconds between moves to change position; the minutes above include them. In the first week, expect the sequence to take a little longer while you check each position against the cards. That is normal.

At-desk break version (about 5 minutes). Glute bridges need a floor, so on a busy day at the office, drop them and run the first three moves. Do five chin tucks, six cat-cow cycles, and one 30-second hip

Table 2.1: The ten-minute routine, minute by minute

Minutes	What to do	Where
0–2	Chin tucks: 10 reps, 5-second hold	Chair
2–4	Seated cat-cow: 10 slow cycles	Chair
4–7	Hip flexor stretch: 30 seconds each side, twice	Beside desk
7–10	Glute bridges: 2 sets of 10, 2-second hold	Floor

flexor stretch per side. This version suits the gap between meetings, and nothing in it requires a change of clothes or leaving your workspace.

Fuller evening version at home (about 10–12 minutes). At home, run the full sequence in the table. If you work from a kitchen table, you can use the kitchen counter for the hip flexor stretch and a rug in the living room for the bridges. Because you are not at a desk, you can add a second set of chin tucks, or take the harder option on any move that feels easy.

Consistency beats intensity

A modest routine done on most working days will do more for a stiff desk-bound body than a long session done once. If you can only manage the at-desk version on some days, that still counts. Ten calm minutes you repeat will serve you better than a heroic session you dread.

Make it stick

Attach the routine to something that already happens: right after you log on, straight after lunch, or before you switch on the television in the evening. Habits that hang on an existing cue survive busy weeks far better than those that rely on remembering.

The 10-minute routine

- [ ] Practise one chin tuck with level eyes, and check it against the card
- [ ] Run ten slow seated cat-cow cycles at half range
- [ ] Hold the standing hip flexor stretch for 30 seconds on each side, with the pelvis tucked
- [ ] Do two sets of ten glute bridges, stopping at a straight line
- [ ] Choose one daily cue (log-on, lunch, or evening) to anchor the routine
- [ ] Stop any move that causes sharp pain, tingling, or numbness

Do this today: Put one calendar alert in your phone for later this afternoon, and run chin tucks and cat-cow when it goes off.

03

A Workstation That Fits a Small Budget

You do not need an expensive ergonomic chair or a new desk to sit more comfortably. Most of the gains come from small adjustments to what you already own, plus a few household items such as a towel, a box and a stack of books. This chapter shows you how to fix your chair, your screen and your daily habits in a single afternoon.

Fixing the Office Chair and Desk You Have

You sit down, and the chair sinks a little lower than you remember. The backrest leans too far back, the seat is deep enough that your knees press against its front edge, and the lever that should fix all this has not worked for years. So you perch on the front of the seat and lean towards the screen, and by mid-morning your lower back has started to ache.



Figure 3.1: A laptop raised on a stand with a separate keyboard and mouse: a low-cost way to bring the screen up to eye level.

A chair does not have to be perfect. It has to let you sit with your feet supported, your hips at or slightly above the level of your knees, and something behind your lower back that you can lean against. Work through the adjustments below in order, because each one affects the next.

Seat height. Sit back in the chair and let your arms hang. Adjust the height so your forearms are roughly level with the desk when your elbows are bent at about a right angle and your shoulders are relaxed. If the chair cannot rise far enough, a firm folded blanket or cushion on the seat will do the job.

Feet. Once the seat is at the right height for your arms, check your feet. They should rest flat, with your knees roughly level with or slightly below your hips. If your feet dangle or you rest on your toes, put something under them: a sturdy box, a stack of old magazines bound with tape, or a thick book. A footrest stops you sliding forward on the seat and takes pressure off the backs of your thighs.

Lower-back support. Most low-cost chairs leave a gap between the backrest and the small of your back. Roll a hand towel into a firm cylinder about the thickness of your forearm and place it behind you at belt level, then sit back against it. A small cushion works too. The aim is gentle support that keeps the natural curve of the lower back, not a hard bump that pushes you forward. If the seat is so deep that its front edge presses behind your knees, the same towel or cushion moves you forward and solves that too.

Table 3.1: Budget workstation fixes

Item	Why it helps	Low-cost fix	Cost tier
Lower-back support	Keeps the natural curve of the lower back and reduces slumping	Rolled hand towel or small cushion	Free
Footrest	Keeps feet supported and stops you sliding forward	Sturdy box, bound magazines or a thick book	Free
Seat height	Puts forearms level with the desk and relaxes the shoulders	Firm folded blanket or cushion on the seat	Free
Screen height	Brings the screen up towards eye level so the head does not drift forward	Stack of books or a ream of paper	Free
Separate keyboard	Lets you raise a laptop screen and keep your hands low	Basic wired keyboard	Under the price of a takeaway lunch
Separate mouse	Keeps the arm close to the body instead of reaching	Basic wired mouse	Under the price of a takeaway lunch
Laptop stand	Raises the screen in a stable, adjustable way	Simple folding stand	A small one-off purchase

Test before you buy

Try each free fix for a few days before spending anything. If a rolled towel solves your lower-back ache, you have no need for a new chair. If it does not, you will at least know what the new chair needs to provide.

Laptops, Screens and the Kitchen Table

A laptop is a compromise. The screen and keyboard are joined, so they can never both be at the right height at once. When the keyboard sits comfortably under your hands, the screen sits low and your head bends forward to read it. Over a long day, that forward head position is one of the main sources of neck and upper-back strain.

The fix is to separate the two. Raise the screen, then add a separate keyboard and mouse so your hands can stay low.

Screen height. Place the screen so that its top edge is at or slightly below your eye level when you sit tall. Your gaze then falls naturally on the upper part of the screen, with your chin level or very slightly lowered. With a laptop flat on the desk, the screen is usually well below that line, so measure it for yourself: sit in your working position, look straight ahead and note where your eyes land on the screen. A stack of books, a ream of paper or a sturdy shoebox will do the job. Check the stack does not wobble when you type.

Screen distance. Set the screen at about arm's length, around 50–70 cm (20–28 inches) from your eyes. If you find yourself leaning in to read, enlarge the text size before you move the screen closer. If you wear varifocal or bifocal glasses, you may need the screen a little lower, so that you do not tip your head back to look through the lower part of the lens.

Keyboard and mouse. Place them close to the front edge of the desk, so your elbows stay near your sides and bent at about a right angle. Your wrists should be roughly straight, neither bent up nor resting hard on the edge of the desk. Keep the mouse right next to the keyboard to avoid reaching out to one side.

The kitchen-table set-up

Imagine you are working from home at the kitchen table. The chair is hard and upright, the table is slightly too high, and the laptop sits flat in front of you. Here is one way to improve it in ten minutes. Put a folded blanket on the chair to bring your elbows level with the table. Place a sturdy box or a pile of books under your feet so they rest flat. Roll a hand towel behind your lower back. Stand the laptop on three or four large books so the top of the screen reaches eye level, and plug in a basic keyboard and mouse in front of it. None of this is permanent, and everything goes back in the cupboard at the end of the day.

There is one important caveat. Even a well set-up workstation will become uncomfortable if you sit at it for hours without moving. A good set-up reduces how hard your neck and back have to work, but it does not replace movement. Rather than searching for one perfect posture, aim for several reasonable

positions that you change between during the day: sitting back against the towel roll, sitting a little more upright, standing for calls, and leaning on the kitchen counter to read a document.

Variety over perfection

Changing position regularly matters more than finding the ideal one. A workstation that lets you sit comfortably, combined with frequent changes of position, will serve you better than a perfect set-up you never move from.

Small Habits for Long Days and Long Commutes

Your workstation is only part of the picture. The other part is how often you move, and that comes down to habits. The goal is simple: interrupt long periods of sitting before posture fatigue builds up.

Movement reminders. Many people find it helpful to change position or stand up at least every 30 minutes, and to take a slightly longer movement break of two or three minutes every hour or so. Set a quiet, repeating timer on your phone or computer. When it goes off, stand up, roll your shoulders, do a few chin tucks or walk to refill your water. If a timer feels intrusive, attach the break to something that happens anyway: the end of each call, sending a long email, or the printer finishing a job.

Natural interruptions. Use the breaks your day already gives you. When a video call drops, the network goes down or a power cut stops work for a few minutes, stand up instead of waiting in your chair. Take phone calls standing where you can, and walk over to a colleague's desk instead of sending a message.

Long calls and meetings. During long calls, change position every so often: sit back against your lower-back support for a while, then sit a little forward with both feet flat, then stand for part of the call if your camera allows. Uncross your legs from time to time, or switch the crossed leg, so that one side does not carry the load for an hour.

On a train or bus. If you have a seat, sit back with both feet flat and your bag on the floor or on your lap, not on one shoulder. Hold your phone higher, closer to eye level, instead of bending your head down to it. You can do slow chin tucks, gentle shoulder rolls and small pelvic tilts forward and back without anyone noticing. If you stand, change the hand that holds the rail every few stops.

In the car. Set the seat so you sit close enough to reach the pedals fully with a slight bend in the knee, with the backrest only slightly reclined and your lower back supported by the seat or a small rolled towel. Never exercise while you are driving, and do not take your hands off the wheel or your eyes off the road to stretch, even in stationary traffic. Save the stretches for when you have parked safely or when you are a passenger. After a long drive, take a minute to stand, walk and do the standing hip flexor stretch from Chapter 2 before you sit down again.

Your budget workstation

- [ ] Set the seat height so your forearms are level with the desk
- [ ] Support your feet with a box or a stack of books if they do not rest flat
- [ ] Place a rolled towel or small cushion behind your lower back
- [ ] Raise the screen so its top edge is at or slightly below eye level
- [ ] Use a separate keyboard and mouse with a laptop
- [ ] Change position at least every 30 minutes and move for a few minutes every hour
- [ ] Stretch on the commute only as a passenger or when parked

Do this today: Raise your screen with a stack of books and set a 30-minute movement reminder on your phone.

04

Your 4-Week Plan and When to Get Help

You now know the four moves and how to set up your workstation. This chapter turns them into four weeks of gradual practice, gives you a simple tracker so you can see whether the routine is helping, and sets out the signs that mean you should stop self-managing and see a professional. Read the red flags section once before you start Week 1.

Week 1 to Week 4: Building the Habit

It is Monday morning, and you have every intention of doing the routine. By Wednesday a deadline has eaten your lunch break, and by Friday you have forgotten about it altogether. That is how most new habits go, and it is why this plan starts small and builds slowly.



Figure 4.1: Short walking breaks, even a flight of stairs, break up long periods of sitting.

The plan follows a simple principle used throughout physiotherapy: increase the load gradually and give your body time to adapt. Muscles, joints and tendons respond well to steady, regular practice, and less well to sudden jumps in effort. Starting gently also lets you learn each movement properly before you add more.

The table below shows what each week looks like. The doses refer to the exercise cards in Chapter 2, and the "at-desk version" is the five-minute sequence of chin tucks, seated cat-cow and the standing hip flexor stretch.

Table 4.1: The 4-week plan at a glance

Week	Focus and frequency	Dose
Week 1	Learn the moves. At-desk version once on each working day; full routine at home on 2–3 evenings	Easier option on every card: chin tucks 5–8 reps with a 2–3 second hold, 6 cat-cow cycles, hip flexor stretch 15–20 seconds per side, 1 set of 8 glute bridges
Week 2	Build the routine. At-desk version once or twice on working days; full routine on 3 evenings	Standard dose: chin tucks 10 reps with a 5-second hold, 8–10 cat-cow cycles, hip flexor stretch 30 seconds per side twice, 2 sets of 10 glute bridges
Week 3	Make it regular. At-desk version twice on working days; full routine on 4–5 evenings	Standard dose; increase only the moves that feel easy and clean
Week 4	Make it yours. At-desk version twice on working days; full routine on 5 evenings	Standard dose; try the harder option on one move at a time if the standard version feels easy

How to progress. Move up a step only when the current dose feels comfortable and you can do every repetition with good form. Change one thing at a time: add repetitions, lengthen a hold, or take the harder option, but not all of them in the same week. If you feel more sore after a step up and it does not settle within a day or two, go back to the previous level for a few more days. Progress is not a straight line, and some weeks you will stay at the same level. That is fine.

Mild soreness is expected. In the first week, you may feel a slight ache in the muscles you have been working, particularly in the buttocks after glute bridges or at the front of the neck after chin tucks. This kind of muscle tiredness is normal and usually fades within a day or two. Sharp, shooting or burning pain is not part of the process; stop the move that causes it and read the red flags later in this chapter.

Missed a day? You will miss days. Everyone does. A missed day is not a failure, and it does not need to be made up with a double session the next day, which only raises the risk of soreness. Simply restart at the level you were at. If you have been away from the routine for a week or more, drop back to the easier options for two or three days and then build up again. The plan works over weeks, not over individual days.

A week that goes off track

Imagine Week 2 starts well: the at-desk version on Monday and Tuesday, the full routine on Tuesday evening. Then a project deadline arrives, and from Wednesday to Friday you do nothing at all. On Saturday you feel tempted to do three full routines to catch up. Instead, do one full routine at the Week 2 dose, note it in the tracker, and treat the following Monday as a fresh start of Week 2. Repeating a week costs you nothing, and it keeps the plan matched to what your body has actually done.

Make it easy to restart

Keep the routine visible. Leave the rolled towel on your chair, put the exercise cards next to your screen, or leave the mat out on the floor at home. The fewer decisions it takes to start, the more likely you are to start again after a busy week.

A daily rhythm helps the routine fit into a working day without becoming one more task to remember. Here is one pattern that works for many office days; adjust the times to your own schedule.



On days when you work from home, you can spread the full routine across the day instead of doing it in one block, as long as each move gets its turn. On days with long commutes, the at-desk version on arrival may be the most useful session of all.

Regular beats intense

A short routine done on most days is the core of the plan. If a week goes badly, do the at-desk version when you can and pick up the full plan again the following week.

At the end of Week 4. Look back over your tracker and ask three questions. Did you practise on most days? Has your pain, or the time of day when it starts, changed at all? Which move feels the most useful for you? If things are improving, keep going with the routine at the level you have reached; there is no need to stop after four weeks. If nothing has changed despite regular practice, or things are worse, that is useful information too, and a good reason to have your neck or back looked at by a physiotherapist or your doctor.

Your Progress Tracker

At the end of a hard week, it is easy to feel that nothing has changed. Memory is unreliable here: it tends to hold on to the bad days and forget the better ones. A simple written record shows you the real trend, and it also gives your doctor or physiotherapist useful information if you do need to see one.

How to score pain. Use a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means no pain at all and 10 means the worst pain you can imagine. Score your pain at the same time each day, for example at the end of your working day, so the scores are comparable. Write down the number that best describes your pain over the day, not the single worst moment. If you have pain in more than one area, score the one that bothers you most, or write two numbers, such as "neck 4, back 2".

What progress looks like. Do not expect a dramatic drop. Day-to-day scores will go up and down, depending on your workload, your sleep and how long you sat. What matters is the overall direction across the weeks. A small, steady change is the pattern to look for: the weekly average creeping down by a point or so, the end-of-day ache arriving later in the afternoon, or stiffness on standing up easing more quickly. Notes are as useful as numbers, so record anything you notice, such as "long meeting, neck tight" or "slept better".

Table 4.2: Daily tracker: print or copy one for each week

Day	Routine done	Pain 0–10	Notes
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

In the "Routine done" column, write "desk" for the at-desk version, "full" for the full routine, or both, so you can see how often you actually practised. At the end of each week, transfer the totals to the summary below.

Table 4.3: Weekly summary

Week	Sessions done	Average pain 0–10	What changed
Week 1			
Week 2			
Week 3			
Week 4			

Use the tracker to adjust

If your scores rise for several days after you move up a level, step back down. If they stay level for two weeks despite regular practice, look at your workstation and your movement breaks in Chapter 3 as well as the exercises. If they keep rising, or you notice any of the signs in the next section, stop and get advice.

Red Flags: When to See a Physiotherapist or Doctor

Most neck, shoulder and lower-back pain linked to desk work is uncomfortable but not dangerous, and it often improves with movement and time. A small number of symptoms, however, need professional attention, and some of them need it urgently. Read this section before you start the plan, and come back to it if anything changes.

The rule for the routine is simple: do not push through sharp pain. If a movement causes sharp, shooting or burning pain, or brings on tingling or numbness, stop that movement. Exercise discomfort should be mild and should settle soon after you finish.

Get urgent medical help, the same day, if you notice

- Loss of control of your bladder or bowels, difficulty passing urine, or numbness around the groin, buttocks or inner thighs
- New numbness or weakness in an arm or a leg, or both legs, or a foot that starts to drag or catch
- Back or neck pain after a fall, an accident or a blow
- Back or neck pain together with fever, or feeling generally unwell
- Neck pain with a sudden severe headache, dizziness, problems with vision, speech or swallowing, or unsteadiness on your feet
- Pain in the chest, jaw or arm, especially with breathlessness, sweating or nausea; treat this as an emergency

See your doctor soon if you have

- Pain that is severe at night, does not ease when you change position, or wakes you regularly
- Back or neck pain together with unexplained weight loss
- New back pain if you have a history of cancer, a weakened immune system, or a condition that affects your bones
- Pain that keeps getting worse week by week, despite rest and gentle movement

Other symptoms are not emergencies, but they are good reasons to have your neck or back checked by a physiotherapist or your doctor instead of relying on this book alone:

- Pain, tingling or pins and needles that spread into an arm, hand, leg or foot
- Pain that is not improving after the four weeks of this plan, or that returns as soon as you stop
- Pain that limits your work, your sleep or your everyday activities
- An exercise that always causes pain, even at the easier level
- Any symptom that worries you or that you do not understand

A physiotherapist will usually begin by asking about your symptoms, when they started, what makes them better or worse, and what your working day involves. They will then look at how you move and check the strength and control of the muscles around your neck, back and hips. Based on what they find, they can tailor the exercises to you, advise on your set-up, or refer you to a doctor if something needs medical attention. You do not need to wait until the pain is severe to ask for help.

This book is for education only and is not a replacement for individual medical advice. If you are unsure whether a symptom is a red flag, treat it as one and ask your doctor.

Your 4-week plan

- [ ] Read the red flags once before you begin, and again if anything changes
- [ ] Start Week 1 with the easier option on every card
- [ ] Progress one thing at a time, only when the current dose feels easy and clean
- [ ] Restart at the same level after a missed day, without doubling up
- [ ] Score your pain from 0 to 10 at the same time each day
- [ ] Look at the weekly trend, not individual days
- [ ] Stop any move that causes sharp pain, tingling or numbness, and get advice if it persists

Do this today: Print or copy the daily tracker, write today's pain score in the first row, and do the at-desk version once.

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