

WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY

Strong Bones, Safer Years

Why Bone Health Matters as We Get Older

Contact: Pat Wessels | 082 442 8521 | p.wessels@topcompliance.co.za

As we age, maintaining strong bones, muscles and joints becomes increasingly important. Bone density and muscle strength can gradually reduce over time, while balance, flexibility and joint movement may also change. This means that a simple trip, slip, awkward lift or fall can have more serious consequences as we get older.

Good bone and joint health is therefore not only a personal health matter. It is also an important part of workplace safety, ergonomics and injury prevention.

Keep Moving

Regular physical activity helps maintain muscle strength, balance, coordination and joint mobility. Strong muscles also help support and protect the joints and reduce the likelihood of falls.

Exercise does not have to mean going to a gym. Many useful activities can be done safely at home.

Simple exercises that can be done at home include:

- Walking around the garden, house or neighbourhood.
- Sit-to-stand exercises from a sturdy chair to strengthen the thighs and hips.
- Wall push-ups to strengthen the upper body.
- Heel raises while holding onto a stable surface to strengthen the lower legs.
- Step-ups using a secure low step.
- Gentle squats using a chair or counter for support.
- Light resistance exercises using resistance bands or small hand weights.
- Balance exercises, such as standing on one leg while holding a stable surface.
- Gentle stretching to maintain flexibility in the legs, shoulders, back and hips.
- Gardening, sweeping and light household activities, which can also keep the body moving.

A good approach is to combine weight-bearing activity, strength exercises, balance exercises and flexibility work.

Exercise should be appropriate for the individual's age, fitness, medical history and ability. Anyone with a medical condition, recent injury, severe joint pain or concerns about balance should obtain medical advice before starting a new exercise programme.

Eat for Strong Bones

Nutrition plays an important role in maintaining healthy bones and muscles. Calcium, vitamin D and protein are especially important.

Examples of calcium-rich foods include:

- Milk, yoghurt and cheese.
- Fortified dairy alternatives.
- Sardines or pilchards with edible bones.
- Tinned salmon with bones.
- Broccoli, kale and other green leafy vegetables.
- Beans and lentils.
- Almonds and other nuts.
- Tofu where calcium has been added.

Vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium. Sources may include:

- Oily fish such as salmon, sardines and mackerel.
- Egg yolks.
- Fortified milk or other fortified foods.
- Safe exposure to sunlight, where appropriate.

Protein helps maintain muscle mass and strength. Useful sources include:

- Eggs, fish, chicken and lean meat.
- Milk and yoghurt.
- Beans, lentils and chickpeas.
- Nuts and seeds.

A balanced diet that includes a variety of whole foods is generally more useful than relying on one specific food or supplement. Supplements should preferably be discussed with a healthcare professional, particularly where a person already takes medication or has a medical condition.

Bone and Joint Health at Work

Age does not automatically mean that a person is unsafe or unable to perform their work. However, physical capacity can change over time. The workplace should therefore support employees by reducing unnecessary strain on the body and preventing avoidable injuries.

Workplace risk assessments should consider:

- Slippery or uneven walking surfaces and poor lighting.
- Stairs and changes in floor level.
- Repetitive lifting and heavy manual handling.
- Working at height.
- Prolonged sitting or prolonged standing.
- Repetitive movements and poorly designed workstations.
- Reaching above shoulder height.
- Frequent bending, twisting or carrying loads over long distances.

Practical Ergonomics for Healthier Bones and Joints

Good ergonomics means fitting the work to the person as far as reasonably practicable. Small adjustments can reduce unnecessary strain on the back, neck, shoulders, hips, knees and wrists.

For desk-based work:

- Adjust the chair so that the feet are supported.

- Keep the knees at approximately hip height.
- Support the lower back.
- Keep the computer screen at a comfortable viewing height.
- Position the keyboard and mouse close enough to avoid excessive reaching.
- Keep frequently used items within easy reach.
- Avoid sitting in the same position for long periods.
- Stand up, stretch or walk briefly at regular intervals.

For standing work:

- Provide suitable footwear.
- Use anti-fatigue matting where appropriate.
- Avoid remaining in one fixed position for long periods.
- Allow changes between sitting and standing where reasonably practicable.
- Position work at a suitable height to reduce bending or stooping.

For lifting and manual handling:

- Assess the load before lifting it.
- Avoid lifting more than can be safely managed.
- Keep the load close to the body.
- Avoid twisting while carrying a load.
- Use mechanical aids where available.
- Use a trolley rather than carrying heavy loads over a distance.
- Ask for assistance when a load is heavy, awkward or unstable.
- Store frequently handled items between approximately knee and shoulder height where possible.

For repetitive work:

- Rotate tasks where practical.
- Take suitable recovery breaks.
- Adjust the workstation to reduce awkward postures.
- Use tools that reduce excessive grip force.
- Review work methods where pain or discomfort develops.

Preventing Falls Remains Essential

Falls are one of the most important hazards to control as people get older. A fall that causes a minor injury in one person may result in a serious fracture in another. Preventing the fall remains the priority.

Simple workplace controls include:

- Keeping walkways clear.
- Repairing uneven flooring.
- Cleaning spills promptly.
- Providing adequate lighting.
- Securing loose mats and cables.
- Maintaining stairs and handrails.
- Keeping emergency routes unobstructed.
- Providing suitable step stools or access equipment rather than allowing people to climb on chairs.

Small Changes Can Make a Big Difference

Healthy ageing does not require extreme exercise programmes or complicated diets. Practical daily habits can make a meaningful difference.

- Move regularly.
- Maintain muscle strength.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Get enough calcium, vitamin D and protein.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- Avoid unnecessary strain on joints.
- Use good lifting techniques.
- Improve workstation ergonomics.
- Address slips, trips and falls quickly.
- Seek medical advice where persistent pain, weakness or balance problems develop.

The key message: Healthy bones, strong muscles and good ergonomics all work together. Staying active, eating well and reducing unnecessary strain can help people remain mobile, independent and safer both at home and at work.

Yours in Health and Safety

Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd