

Work Smart, Not Harder

By Grace Young, MA,OTR

It is hard to overstate the importance of good body mechanics. Good body mechanics is your own ability to use your body with maximum efficiency – to work smarter, not harder in doing the things you do.

Using your body efficiently reduces muscle weakness and pain, fatigue, backaches, neck pain and even a predisposition to developing nerve compression problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome. Since each person has an individual pattern of muscle weakness, standard rules may not apply to everyone. But there are some common principles that apply to most of us:

*** Be willing to sit down.** Prolonged standing is stressful: some polio survivors say it is harder for them to stand in one place than it is to walk. Sitting lessens the demand on the cardiovascular system and relieves the weight bearing joints of the legs and the back. It takes 25% more energy to perform an activity standing than sitting. You can sit while working on hobbies, while dressing, shaving or styling your hair. No polio survivor should stand in the shower. It is energy wasteful and dangerous.

Almost any activity can be performed while sitting if you analyze and plan ahead. However, sometimes sitting down causes your work surface to be too high, which can fatigue your arms. It is not a good trade-off if you rest your legs but overuse your arms. One solution I use for working at the kitchen counter is a drafting chair that has a pneumatic height adjustment, a footrest (very important that your legs don't dangle) and an adjustable backrest. A high bar stool would also work, provided you can get one and off easily.

I also use a kitchen cart on wheels that has a lower surface. The bottom shelf folds up so I can put a cutting board on the top shelf and sit with my legs under it while I prepare food. Then I just roll the cart over to the counter and transfer the food.

*** Use assistive products to help you get up.** Getting up from chairs is often a struggle. To give myself a little "lift", I had a high density foam cushion, four inches thick, fabricated at an upholstery shop. For a small fee they covered the cushion with fabric and added a carrying handle. There is also the "catapult seat," a device with a pneumatic piston that compresses when you sit and expands when you want to stand, thus helping to lift your weight out of the chair. You can also buy chair leg extenders to elevate the whole chair. (Editor's note: I have found extenders in 3", 4", 5" and 6" heights. I have 3" extenders on my "family room" chair and it's made a big difference on my shoulders when I get up.)

*** No power lifting.** Lifting and setting down a load can be hazardous to your health, as improper movements can squander energy and cause back injuries. Take a moment and assess a situation before you start the lift. How much does the object weigh? Must it be carried and how far?

If your legs are strong enough, it is best to squat and lift with your legs, not your back. Always test the weight of the load first by pushing with your foot. Injuries occur because a load is heavier- or lighter- than expected. If the load does not push easily it is certainly too heavy for you to lift safely, so ask for assistance. (Of course, a good rule of thumb for polio survivors is to ask someone else to

lift.) Remember not to hold your breath during strenuous activities, especially lifting. Inhale at the beginning of an activity or when you reach out or upward. Exhale when you are exerting yourself during an activity, such as lifting, pushing, pulling or bending.

If leg weakness prevents you from lifting with your legs, you need to take extra precautions to avoid muscle overuse and back injury. Do not stand up while holding a load.

*** Use aids for carrying** Lifting and carrying aren't good for polio survivors. They pull your center of gravity forward, which can strain your back and over use the shoulder, arm and leg muscles. This is one area where a few changes can save a lot of energy. (Remember it is dangerous and not energy efficient to carry anything up and down stairs.) There are four inexpensive carrying aids essential for conserving energy.

1. The kitchen utility cart on casters enables you to transport dishes, glasses and food with just one trip from the counter to the table and back again. Use the cart to carry items in the house.

2. Rolling backpacks – initially marketed for students- are great for books, files, even clothing.

3. A lightweight luggage cart is useful for more than traveling. Take it to the mall to carry your purchases and use it for transporting loads between the car, the house or office and from room to room. Keep the luggage care in a handy place. Open and ready for use.

4. A collapsible grocery cart carries bulkier loads, like laundry, grocery bags and garden plants.

Remember that you can push twice as much weight as you can pull and you'll have less risk of back strain. Pushing forward builds up momentum and gives you something lean on for support.

*** Take it easy in bed.** One load you always need to be careful about moving is you. To save energy when you get into bed, sit on the edge and lower yourself onto one side while supporting yourself on your arms. Bend your knees and bring legs and feet up onto the bed, then roll over on your back. Reverse these movements to sit up or get out of bed. Remember these movements to sit up or get out of bed. Remember to put your feet over the edge before you sit up. It also helps to have a nightstand neat to hold onto when you sit up.

Editor's note: For those of us with limited use of our legs, these movements may not be possible. From personal experience, I have found that getting out of a bed that's too low is a "killer." If you are buying a new bed or mattress keep in mind a height that will make getting up from bed easy. For an existing bed, consider the height extenders we mentioned for chairs. It can make a great deal of difference. Also remember, you don't want a bed that is TOO high, so it can endanger you for falling while getting out of bed.

On another note, for those of us who cannot lift our legs except by using our hands and arms, I find that getting dressed, changing shoes, getting in and out of a car, etc. can be very exhausting during the course of the day. Having to pick up each leg to get it where I want it wrecks havoc on my upper arms and shoulders. I try to plan ahead when laying out clothes, when arranging my bath items, when gathering materials for hobbies or work, etc. Any advanced thought that will save me from having to make unnecessary movements is well worth taking the extra time. CTR

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