HEALTH } Posture Primer

If you're like many nail techs, you go home after a long day with aches and pain in your hands, shoulders, and back. Proper posture and improved ergonomics can help reduce these symptoms that are often viewed as an unavoidable side effect of being a nail tech. BY MICHELLE PRATT

As defined by our friends at Google, "ergonomics is the study of how equipment and furniture can be arranged in order that people can do work or other activities more efficiently and comfortably." You'll note that ergonomics refers to inanimate objects: equipment and furniture. However, the best ergonomically designed equipment on the market won't help us if we don't develop the habit of good posture. Below we look at how ergonomics can help reduce strain to our bodies, and we compare improper and proper posture during both pedicure services and manicure or enhancement services.

During any nail service, whether it's at a pedi throne or at a nail table, a nail tech has to contend with three main factors: supporting the weight of the client's arm or leg, working while looking down at the hand or foot, and working while looking forward at the hand or foot.

Pedicure — Looking Down

(working on cuticles/filing/polish, some pumice/sloughing)

Incorrect: When techs need to perform close-up, detailed work, there is a tendency to round the shoulders and extend the neck to get as close to the foot as possible, which will cause strain to the muscles in the upper body and the entire back. Worse, when that doesn't work, techs can add enormous strain to their bodies as they try to get into a position that gives them the best perspective.

Correct: Many salons have opted to elevate the pedicure throne, which has certainly improved the ergonomic relationship between the tech and client. However, techs should still be mindful of their posture while they perform the service. Cynthia Burt, injury prevention division manager at UCLA Environmental Health & Safety, says to choose a chair that offers lower back support and the ability to make height adjustments throughout the day. Techs should keep their back straight and supported, and use both the height adjustment of their chair and of the footrest to keep the foot at a workable level instead of straining the body. Burt suggests techs should also employ the help of the clients by asking them to bend their knees and move their feet to appropriate positions.

Pedicure — Bearing the Weight

Incorrect: Don't bear the weight of a client's leg by resting the foot in your lap or by using your own strength to lift and lower the leg. This strains the muscles in your shoulders and back, and, because you are connected to the client, it also reduces your mobility to be agile as you work through the different steps of the service.

Correct: Instead, elevate clients and place their feet or legs on a footrest that bears their weight. Some pedicure units have footrests that are height-adjustable, which keeps the foot in a workable position during various stages of a pedicure. Even during the massage portion of a service, the footrests can bear the majority of the weight so techs can limit pressure on their back, shoulders, and neck.

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Pedicure — Looking Forward

(massage/slough/pumice)

Incorrect: To improve stability and get full use of the strength of their upper body, many techs plant their legs firmly on the ground and then sit at the edge of their stool during the part of the pedicure where they will massage, slough, pumice, or rinse the legs and feet of the client. While sitting with feet flat on the ground is correct, "perching" (the proper term for this position, says Burt) offers no support to the tech's lower back and leads to muscle fatigue.

Correct: Be sure to sit straight with feet on the floor to give you the best balance and support. Sit back fully in the chair to get all the benefits of the lumbar support. The correct position has the tech holding a straight posture while perching from the support the chair offers the lower back. If you find that you continue to sit forward without your lower back against the back of the chair, you may need to purchase a chair that fits you better or one that compensates for the mechanics of your task. Some chairs drop the front of the seat down to allow techs to work from a more open and maneuverable position.

Nail Table — Bearing the Weight

Incorrect: It looks as if you're holding a client's hand with a gentle touch and soft hold, but the reality is that your wrists and hands are being repeatedly strain and taxed. Over time, the added weight, combined with the repetitive motion, takes a toll on your muscles and joints and can cause long-term problems, such as arthritis and carpel tunnel.

Correct: As with a pedicure, some sort of rest should bear the client's weight. Products on the market, such as the Wrist-Assist, maintain a full range of motion for a client, while keeping her wrist supported and the hand limp. This alleviates the need for the tech to support the weight of the entire arm during the service, and prevents the customer from "fighting" with the tech for control of her fingers.

Nail Table — Looking Down

(prep, application, some filing, polish)

Incorrect: This technician has her shoulders rolled forward, her left arm is resting on the table, which pushes her shoulder up, she is twisted in her chair, and her legs are crossed. "Crossing the legs causes more compression on one side of the body than the other," says Burt. "It also suggests that the person has very weak abdominal muscles. Crossing the leg tilts your pelvis so you can sit up straight for a longer period without getting tired."

Correct: Many times techs may twist in their chair because they want to get closer to their work. Instead of contorting themselves into this position, Burt suggests techs might benefit from a table with a cut-out that allows her to sit straight in her chair but still work on the client's hands from an angle. Techs can improve their posture even without a cut-out in the desk by strengthening their core muscles so they are able to sit straight for longer periods of time. It is also important to develop a habit of keeping both feet on the floor to prevent the unbalanced compression. Techs may also benefit from using a magnifying glass during the detail portion of the service. A desk lamp with a magnifying lens helps prevent techs from having to hunch forward to get an up-close view of the hands.