Workplace stretching and flexibility programs are gaining popularity not only as a means to reduce the occurrence of occupational injuries and costs of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSD), but also to improve flexibility/range of motion and provide a constructive outlet for emotional tension and stress relief. Work-related musculoskeletal injuries are the most common non-fatal occupational injuries and account for countless missed workdays among employees in the United States. Most cases are associated with service and social assistance industries, such as healthcare, with nursing occupations reporting a rate more than seven times the national average. Both the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine estimate the economic burden of these disorders in America, as measured in lost wages, compensation costs, and lost productivity, to be $45 billion to $54 billion annually.

WMSDs are defined as injuries related to or resulting from workplace ergonomic risk factors. They involve bones, muscles, tendons, ligaments, nerves, and cartilage. Areas most often affected include joints and spinal discs, and injuries are frequently caused by cumulative overload, high repetitive movements, and prolonged static exertion. WMSDs may be worsened by muscle tension stemming from emotional stress such as production pressure.

Nurse anesthetists are exposed daily to ergonomic risks and emotional stressors, making us highly susceptible to exhaustion, fatigue, strain, and injury. While diligently delivering patient care, we multi-task—we listen for alarms, review monitor displays, attend to surgeon requests, and possibly, teach student registered nurse anesthetists. This sensory overload is paired with brisk motor activity—repetitive bending, lifting and twisting maneuvers, and long periods of standing or sitting often with poor posture. These and countless other physical and emotional daily stressors can lead to WMSDs for anesthetists. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration is the federal agency responsible for the oversight and compliance with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration Act of 1970 (OSH Act). It was enacted to ensure employers provide a safe and healthful workplace, free from physical hazards and toxic substances. However, methods to reduce ergonomic risks, such as engineering redesign and administrative controls, often necessitate capital expenditures superseded by alternative investments.

Anesthetists are well versed at utilizing ingenuity to overcome challenges. As astute thinkers we pride ourselves on our sharp assessment and smooth intervention to prevent, reduce, or control actual or potential problems in a wide range of clinical scenarios. In striving to keep our community on a similar path of personal well-being, AANA Health and Wellness suggests taking some time to stretch. With a bit of creativity, simple range of motion and circulatory enhancing activities can be performed on the job and integrated into a work routine. Carving out just 5 to 10 minutes once or twice daily during moments of down time in the OR may be all that is needed to avoid an injury or, better yet, power through a rough day. Doing a simple Internet search for stretches that can be done at a desk will provide you with many great ideas.

Here we present 10 simple stretch and flexibility exercises from WebMD, which we encourage you to try. Be a trendsetter, perform these exercises and see how you feel. Consider creating personal challenges for yourself and colleagues. Set goals such as performing stretch routines several times a day; morning and afternoon, or performing five minutes of stretching at the top of each hour during each OR case. Be creative and have fun!

**Stand up and sit down** – You might be surprised that this can be a little challenging without using your hands.

**Shoulder Shrug** – Lift your shoulders up to your ears. Hold for three seconds and release. Repeat this exercise three times. Also, try slowly moving your head ‘yes and no.’ By over exaggerating the moves, you get a good neck stretch.
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Air Circles – With your hands extended in front, or to your sides if there is enough room, clench your fists and make circles in the air with your fists. Do each direction 10 times and vary the size of your air circles.

Wrist Stretch – With your left hand stretched out in front of you, palm facing down, bend your wrist and point your fingers toward the floor. Use your right hand to gently pull your fingers up. Use your right hand to gently pull your hand closer to yourself to increase this stretch. Repeat with the right hand.

Torso Twist – Inhale and as you exhale twist to the right grabbing your chair to help increase the twist. Hold the twist and see how far behind your right shoulder you can see with your eyes. Repeat this stretch to the left.

Leg Extensions – Grab the seat of your chair and extend your right leg straight so that it is parallel to the floor. Point your toes forward and then flex them back toward yourself five times. Release your foot back to the floor. Repeat on the left side.

Big Hug – Ensure you are sitting or standing erect, give yourself a hug. Hold this position as you breath slowly. Try to increase the area between your shoulder blades upon each exhale.

Cross your Arms – With your left arm stretched across your torso, grab your left forearm with your right hand. Keeping the left arm straight gently pull it across your chest with the right hand. Repeat with the right arm.

Leg Hug – Sit on the edge of your chair. If it has wheels, make sure it is wedged against a wall or anesthesia machine so it does not roll. With your feet flat on the floor lean over and bring your chest to your knees. Give your legs a hug and feel the stretch in your back and shoulders.

Look Up – Sitting up tall in your chair, stretch your arms overhead and interlock your fingers. Tilt your head back lifting your chin in the air as you look up toward the ceiling. Inhale and exhale a few times and then release.

For more information and resources, go to www.AANAWellness.com and follow the links to Physical Well-Being and Workplace Wellness. Do you have any favorite stretches not listed here? Share them with us or send feedback on these 10, email wellness@aana.com.

References


