

Everyone knows what it feels like to wear a pair of shoes that doesn't fit properly—it hurts! But what happens when you sit all day on a chair that doesn't fit? Well, that hurts, too.

About 11 million women have office jobs, and another four or five million work in factories, where they sit on chairs, stools or workbenches that don't fit them properly. A poorly designed chair is not only uncomfortable; it can be harmful to your health and handicap your ability to work efficiently, as well. Experts estimate that at least 40 minutes of productive time are lost each work day because of poor chair design.

What exactly is a well-designed chair? There are four key factors:

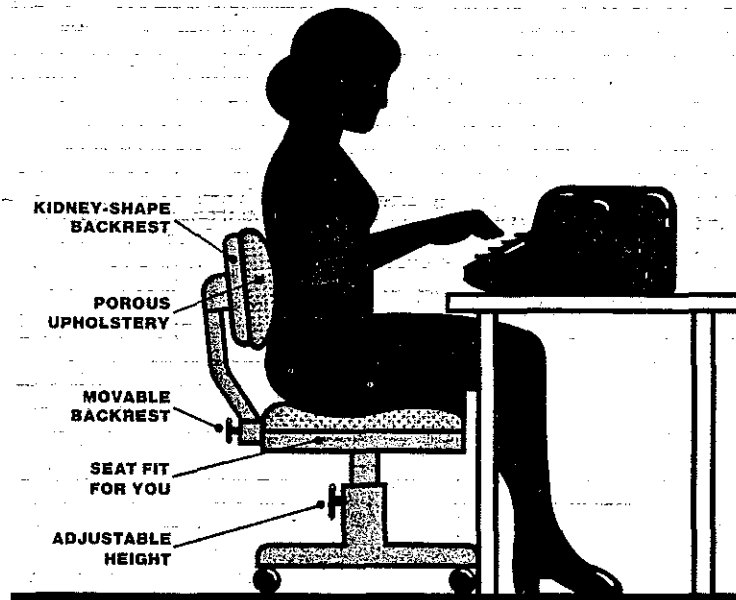
**The height.** A chair's height should be adjustable so that, when you're seated, your hips and knees are at right angles and your feet are flat on the floor. If your chair seat is too high, it can press on the back of your thighs, impeding blood circulation. And if you have to move your feet to operate a foot pedal on a dictaphone or sewing machine, an incorrect height can seriously strain muscles in your back and legs and even lead to muscle-joint disease.

How can you tell if a chair is the right height for you? First, figure your "popliteal height," the distance between the crease behind your knee and the floor when you stand straight. The highest point of the seat should be approximately two inches less than your popliteal height.

**The backrest.** Many office chairs have adjustable heights, but very few have adjustable backrests. Yet it's essential that you be able to move the backrest forward or backward so the size of the seat is appropriate to the

## FINDING A CHAIR THAT FITS

BY JEANNE M. STELLMAN, PH.D.



sitter. A backrest—kidney-shaped ones are best—should fit snugly in the small of the back so it supports the spine and the lower back.

**The seat.** The chair seat should be slanted backward just enough to allow you to lean comfortably against the backrest, but not so slanted that you slip too deeply into the chair and have to stretch and strain to reach things. The edge of the seat should be scrolled so it doesn't dig into the back of your leg, and the entire seat should swivel; that way, if your work requires turning the torso, your back will be supported by the backrest as you turn. A chair seat that is too long can also place undue pressure on the lower back and thighs, since it forces you to lean forward in order to work. A well-fitting seat will end approximately five inches from the crease behind your knee when you are sitting against the backrest.

**The material.** Chair-seat material

should be porous, to allow normal body heat to dissipate. Wool and cotton textured fabrics are best (the texture prevents you from sliding forward); vinyl and other plastics do not allow body heat to escape. This is particularly important if, like many women, you wear layers of clothing also made from synthetic material—nylon or acetate underpants, panty hose or slippers, polyester skirts, for example—which tend to trap normal body heat and increase perspiration. Some experts even think that this daily build-up of heat and moisture can cause such medical problems as bladder infections or vaginitis.

Finally, it doesn't do much good to have a chair that fits but a work surface that doesn't. The height of your desk, table or typewriter stand should also be adjustable so you can sit back in your chair, arms at right angles to your body, as you work.

What if you're stuck with a chair that just doesn't sit right? Stand up and speak out. Ask your boss or supervisor if there's a better chair available. Once you find one that fits you, attach a name tag to it so others will know it's yours. If you belong to a union, consider bringing the problem up with the health-and-safety committee at the next meeting (many of your co-workers undoubtedly suffer from the same problem). Or organize your own group to draw up a plan of action and submit it to management. It's certainly time people stood their ground on the issue of being seated!

*Dr. Stellman is chief of the Division of Occupational Health and Toxicology, the American Health Foundation, and is the author of Women's Work Women's Health, published by Pantheon.*