

Driving: Not just painful because of the gas prices?

By Jennifer Finlayson, O.T. Reg. (N.S.), former NSTU EIP Manager

More and more NSTU members are travelling for work. Consultants, coordinators, and specialists who work in more than one school, as well as those teachers and Community College members who accept assignments outside their local communities are spending more and more time in their cars. Members have been listening to the occupational therapists with the Early Intervention Program preach office ergonomics for years now, but it is just as important to pay attention to your posture in the car as it is at your desk!

There are many factors which may cause development of back or neck pain while driving: sitting in one posture for prolonged periods of time without a break, awkward postures when using the car as an office, as well as poor lifting techniques to remove resources and bags from the car seat or trunk.

1) It is extremely important to adopt good and comfortable postures while in your car. Find a range of comfortable driving positions within your car seat's adjustability options and make frequent changes to the settings throughout your long road trips. AVOID awkward postures, twisting or leaning to one side, reaching with arms outstretched. Always keep your left leg extended next to the pedals (unless you are driving a standard), and use stop lights, construction zone stops and time sitting in drive-thrus to rotate your ankles and stretch your neck to get the blood flowing! Take a break from driving every couple of hours if you are on a long road trip.

2) If you are using your car as an office space, AVOID using your laptop or doing paperwork in your car. There is no safe and stress free way to position your body in your car to use the computer. Instead, find an alternative location like a satellite office, coffee shop or even a picnic table during warm days.

3) Laws surrounding cell phone use in the car improves your safety and ergonomics in the car. Use hands-free or headset systems if you need to talk on the phone while driving. Otherwise, pull over and park your car to use your phone, and do not cradle the phone between your ear and your shoulder!

4) AVOID storage of supplies and resources in the front and back seats. This encourages reaching and twisting to access these items, and could be a safety hazard if you are required to stop suddenly. Instead, store your supplies in the trunk of the car. When lifting items out of the trunk, ensure you stand as close to the load as possible. Secure loose items at the front of the trunk to reduce unnecessary bending and reaching.

5) If you have to lift items out of your car, BE CAREFUL when you have been driving for a long time or the weather is cold, as you are at a greater risk of back injury. Park close to the drop off point when possible to avoid carrying long distances. Wheeled bags are also beneficial in some cases to minimize carrying requirements. Keep in mind any stairs or curbs which may limit use of such bags.



Seating is also an important part of comfortable driving and is something we should all consider when purchasing a new car. The more adjustability options the seat has, the more likely you will find a comfortable posture. Seating in general should feel comfortable and have independent height and tilt adjustments. The following are features in a car you should be looking for:

- **Seat base:** adequate leg length so that thighs are supported and you can fit two fingers between the back of your knee and the edge of the seat. The seat width should be wider than the hips and thighs. The seat height should be adjustable so you can operate foot pedals and other controls without reaching, you can easily see all display panels, and you have good vision outside the car.

- **Back rest:** height of back rest should reach shoulders and not obstruct your rear vision. It should also be wide enough to support your shoulders and offer continuous support along the length of your spine. The lumbar support should fit the shape of your back without any gaps.

- **Headrest:** Ideally, the top of the headrest should be raised to or above ear level as this will offer the best support in

the event of a sudden stop or acceleration.

- An adjustable **steering wheel** is best so you can comfortably hold the wheel with both hands and your vision is not obstructed. It should be close enough to you that your arms have a slight bend which reduces arm and shoulder strain and provides you with greater control while steering.

Before you adjust your seat to suit your own needs, ensure the seat is in the initial set-up position with steering wheel full up and fully forward, seat height at its lowest, seat base tilted to its lowest position, back rest reclined about 30 degrees, seat all the way back. Once in this position, you can make the appropriate adjustments to meet the recommendations above to improve your comfort and safety during long or short drives. Remember, car ergonomics is important any time you drive—whether it's five minutes to the corner store or four hours on a summer road trip!

For more information on car ergonomics or for an individualized assessment, please contact one of the NSTU's occupational therapists at 1-800-565-6788, eip@nstu.ca. More research, recommendations and tips are available through Loughborough University online at www.lboro.ac.uk and www.otworks.ca.

eBayMotors.co.uk characterizes the four most common driving postures and corrective postures for each:

1. **The Rollercoaster** is characterized by leaning forward and sitting upright, seat forward and arms and legs bent. It is corrected by relaxing and reclining the seat slightly to support the back.
2. **The Multi-tasker** is characterized by a straight back with arms bent and one hand on the gear shift. It is corrected by not multi-tasking, reclining the seat slightly and placing both hands on the wheel.
3. **The Racer** is characterized by straight arms and legs with a reclined seat and a low driving position. It is corrected by moving the seat so that arms and legs are slightly bent and raising the seat so that the hips are higher than the knees and the back is supported.
4. **The Pimp** is characterized by an inclined seat with one hand on the wheel and the other on the window or ledge or hanging out the window entirely. It is corrected by straightening the seat back so there is only a slight recline and raising the seat so hips are above the knees. Rolling up the window to remind you to keep both hands on the wheel may also help.

For previous *The Well Teacher* articles,
go to www.nstu.ca

Click on ► **Communications**
► **NSTU Publications** ► **The Teacher**
► **The Well Teacher**

[From *The Teacher*, September 2015, Volume 54 Number 1, Page 6 © NSTU 2015]