

**DISPATCHES
FROM THE HOME FRONT**

Recognizing The Chair

In A Quest For The Perfect
Home Office Seat, You've Got
To Sit Down On The Job

By VALERIE FINHOLM
Special To The Courant

uch.

My back hurts.

Ever since I began working at home, my search for the perfect office chair has become a hobby, without the fun.

I've spent more than \$200 on two chairs and I'm in the market for a third. I've done the "sit" test on at least a dozen chairs, scoured the Internet for a perfect chair, talked to an office-design expert on the importance of a good office chair, and interviewed an ergonomics expert at Cornell University on how to choose a chair.

Yet my search for a painless chair — one that I can sit comfortably on while staring at my computer for hours at a time — has been elusive.

I was a novice — naive actually — when I bought my first office chair after testing it for about 30 seconds at an office supply store. The seat on the \$79 chair

was soft and the back pliable. It enveloped me in that old-couch kind of way. But like an old couch, within an hour in front of the computer, I had a sinking sensation. As the minutes ticked by, my back continued sinking, sinking ... slouching. Within a couple of hours the vertebrae on my spine had curved into a "C," and my neck was heavy and jutted out, turtle-style.

For chair No. 2, I did my shopping on the Internet, and — caught up in a sale (half-price!) — I bought a cool-looking red office chair. When the leather chair arrived, I DIY'ed together, sat down, and immediately realized that it's not a good idea to buy an office chair without sitting in it first.

This time the seat was too hard, and there was a watermelon-sized gap between the back of the chair and my spine. I remedied this by stuffing pillows into the space, but they slipped onto the floor every time I got up, which was often because my back hurt.

TAKING, HZ

>> The chair back should recline and support your back in different positions. Movement of the back while you are sitting helps to maintain a healthy spine. Locking the chair's backrest in one position generally isn't recommended.



How to choose an ergonomic chair

▶▶ The chair back rest should be large enough to provide good back support. The best provide mid-back and upper-back support in addition to lumbar support.

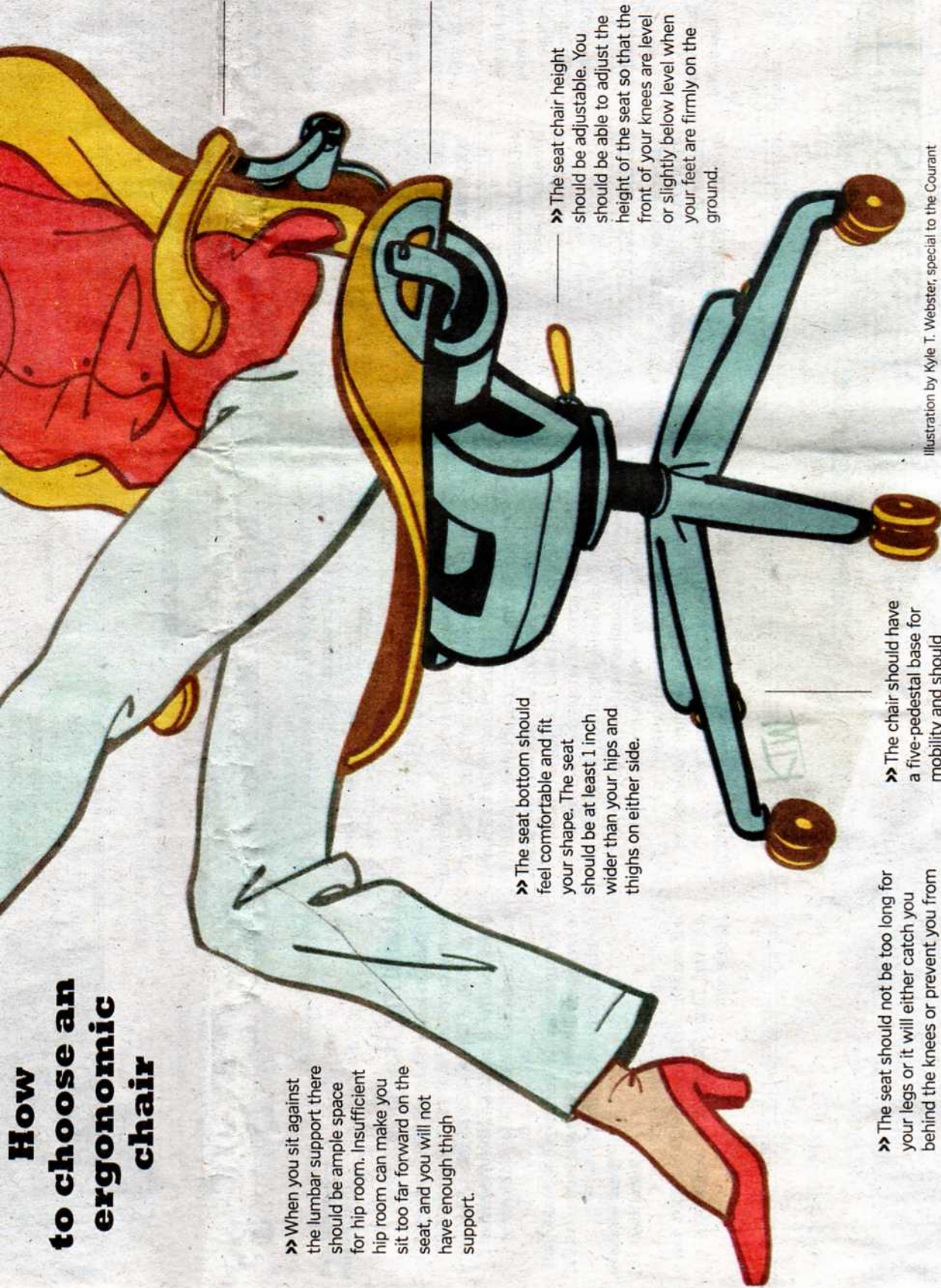
▶▶ If you need armrests, they should be broad, contoured, cushioned and comfortable. You should be able to easily adjust the height.

▶▶ The chair should have a comfortable lumbar (lower back) rest. The chair should have lumbar supports that can be adjusted up and down and forward and backward.

▶▶ It should be comfortable to sit on.

▶▶ The seat should still feel comfortable after 60 to 120 minutes of sitting.

▶▶ The seat should be contoured to allow even weight distribution.



▶▶ The seat bottom should feel comfortable and fit your shape. The seat should be at least 1 inch wider than your hips and thighs on either side.

▶▶ The seat chair height should be adjustable. You should be able to adjust the height of the seat so that the front of your knees are level or slightly below level when your feet are firmly on the ground.

▶▶ The seat should not be too long for your legs or it will either catch you behind the knees or prevent you from leaning fully back against the lumbar (back) support of the chair.

▶▶ The chair should have a five-pedestal base for mobility and should swivel easily.

Illustration by Kyle T. Webster, special to the Courant
SOURCE: Cornell University Ergonomics Web

Taking A Stand On The Perfect Chair For The Office

CONTINUED FROM E1

I spent more time arranging my pillow-chair combination than I did working.

Expert Advice

When I consult with Neal Zimmerman, an award-winning home-office architect and author who lives in West Hartford, he warns me not to skimp when it comes to purchasing an office chair.

"I advise everyone to spend money on getting a good, supportive office chair," says Zimmerman, who says he sits on a Humanscale chair. "We spend as much time in our chairs as we do in our beds. You can skimp on the desk, but not the chair."

I quickly consulted the Web and found that Humanscale office chairs go for more than \$1,000.

Ouch.

Hoping to find a cheaper solution, I called Alan Hedges, the expert at Cornell in ergonomics, which he defines as "the science of work."

Hedges — who says he sits on a Humanscale chair (two points for that chair) — was adamant that an office chair should be tested for at least a couple of days at your workstation to determine if it's a good "fit" with your set-up: desk, computer, mouse.

The right chair has good lumbar support for your back, and a seat "pan" (the part you sit on) that slides backward and forward.

"You can't use price as a guide, any more than if you're buying a pair of shoes," Hedges says. "It's what fits

you, what's going to be comfortable" and give support.

Then again, he adds, "Most high-end chairs are really good chairs."

Sort of like shoes.

Before the advent of the personal computer, Hedges designed work stations for typing pools.

"Now everybody's typing," he says, and a poor chair compounded with a poor desk set-up is a recipe for injury.

"Day after day you're insulting your body and your body's never recovering from it," he says.

Scary.

One more thing, Hedges advises: "Don't be fooled by a cushy chair."

The Alexander Technique

I sign up for a class with my local adult education center on the Alexander Technique for proper posture. The flier's description of the class seems as if it is written for me.

"Are you confused about which chairs are good for you and which are bad? Have you spent too much time and money trying to find a solution to sitting well? You will learn to identify what chairs benefit your natural posture, how to make inexpensive adjustments to chairs and ways to improve how you are sitting in order to minimize fatigue and maximize energy."

Yes!

Pointing to a baby-size plastic skeleton dangling from her hand, our teacher, Sara Miller, who is certified in the Alexander Technique, shows us that the spine naturally

curves in an "S" shape, with the head — which is heavy — balanced on top. When we hunch our shoulders, pressure is put on the lower back. When we hunch, it collapses the spine, drawing the body downward, and with it, our energy.

To keep the body from getting fatigued while sitting, she gives us four rules: Sit on the "sit bones," hinge at the hips (not the neck!), keep the feet on the floor and think "up" (as though a thread is pulling your head up).

Miller then takes a typical low-budget armless office

chair and modifies it, using foam and a back-size piece of plywood. The fit is perfect, but I don't want to have to get into the pillow-thing again.

When I ask what kind of office chair she uses, I expect to hear something like "regular old office chair (See Chair No. 1 above) that she modified using foam and that piece of plywood."

Even If The Chair Fits ...

I finally take the plunge. I order the \$1,249 Humanscale Freedom — marked down to

\$639.96 plus \$64 shipping from an online catalog that promises I can send it back with no shipping charges if I don't like it.

I'm spending much more than I planned. But, according to the description on the Internet, my ergonomically correct chair will have a "dual pivot back rest" and a seat and back made of "soft, supple and lightly textured" black dyed leather from Germany (my emphasis).

Sounds like a car: if it ends my quest for the perfect office chair, I won't regret the amount of time it'll

take to pay off my credit card! But just after I order my chair, I come across a study from the University of Missouri that found sitting on a chair — any chair — for a long time is bad for your health. Specifically, long bouts of chair-sitting contribute to those dangerous fatty deposits around the stomach. The remedy? Stand up! Or, to be more specific, "Stand up and putter," when you're on the phone and such, according to the study. Maybe I don't need an office chair after all.