

## Equipment, Tools and Workspace

The primary piece of equipment used by most practitioners is the treatment table. While a manual therapist may concentrate on features such as price, color and client comfort when choosing a table, the features that ergonomists would consider most important are weight, table dimensions (especially width), and adjustability.

Weight is a particularly important consideration for students and for practitioners with a mobile practice. They may have to lift their tables several times a day, often out of an awkward location, such as the back of a car. Tables are difficult to carry because they are large and need to be carried either with one hand or on one shoulder. To compensate for the increased load on one side of the body, the muscles of the lower back on the opposite side have to contract more. This asymmetrical loading around the lumbar vertebrae can result in disc damage.

A key ergonomics principle is to lighten the load when lifting and carrying. That means buying the lightest table you can find, and placing face cradles, bolsters and other equipment in another bag that can be lifted and carried separately. It is a good idea to use a cart to transport even the lightest table. Several manufacturers offer small carts specifically built for transporting portable tables. Look for large diameter wheels, which will roll easily over obstacles and can make going up and down stairs easier. If you don't think a cart will work for you, at least use a carrying case with a shoulder strap long enough to cross over to the opposite shoulder. By slinging the case across your body, you can take some of the weight of the table onto your shoulder and hip. Alternate the shoulder on which you carry the table to avoid overusing one side of your body.

You can find more information about some of the recommended tools and equipment in this section at [www.SaveYourHands.com](http://www.SaveYourHands.com).

### Table Dimensions and Adjustments

The most important non-adjustable table dimension to consider is width. With the population getting larger all the time, it may be tempting to buy the widest table available to provide more room for your clients. Some modalities may involve placing your knee up on the table or sitting next to the client, and for those techniques, a wider table makes

## Save Your Hands!



For seated work, set the table height a few inches above the height of your elbows to perform precision work.



Stand up and set the table a couple of inches below elbow height to perform work that requires more pressure or larger movements.

sense. However, for most treatment work, a wide table can lead to bending over, twisting and reaching out, particularly for shorter practitioners. These awkward postures increase stress on the shoulders and lower back. A narrower table will be lighter and less bulky to lift, and will provide better access to the mid-line of the client. Side extensions are available for some narrow tables for use with larger clients. There are also tables available that are wide at the shoulders and feet, but narrow through the center. These tables better match most clients' body proportions, and provide the practitioner with better access to the lower back and hips, which are typically a major focus of hands-on treatment.

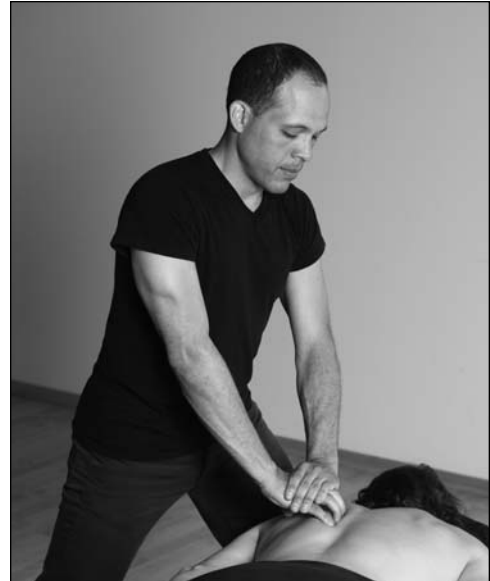
Along with width, the height of the table is very important to your working posture. There is no one table height that is appropriate for all types of work. Here are some general ergonomics guidelines for positioning your work based on the amount of force and type of movements involved:

- Small, precise, and low-force movements of the hands should be done at or a little above elbow height while seated in a neutral posture (a more detailed description of neutral posture can be found on page 79).
- Work involving larger movements and moderate amounts of force should be done several inches or more below elbow height while standing, also in a neutral posture.
- As a general rule, for light to medium work, your knuckles should just brush the top of your table when you swing your arm out in front of you.

- As the force requirements of the work increase, the height of the work surface should drop, so that body weight and larger muscle groups can be used to apply the force.
- When working with bigger clients, you will need to lower the table as necessary.

Given that most practitioners do a combination of different techniques with each client, nearly all manual therapists would benefit from using a power-adjustable table, although obviously this is not an option for a mobile practice. In some hands-on health professions, using power-adjustable tables is the norm. In other professions, particularly massage therapy, many practitioners work with tables that cannot be readily adjusted during a treatment session. While power-adjustable tables do cost more than other tables, the benefit of being able to adjust the table as you move from technique to technique is well worth that investment in your long-term health, particularly if you work full-time as a manual therapist. Using a power-adjustable table is not only better for you as a practitioner; it is also better for your clients, since the quality of the treatment you provide is bound to improve when you can easily adjust the table.

For practitioners who are happy with their current manually adjustable tables and do not want to invest in a power-adjustable table, retrofit kits are available



Drop the table several inches for deep work requiring more downward force.

#### **Five Good Reasons to Use a Power-Adjustable Treatment Table**

1. They are easier to adjust in height than standard treatment tables, so you are more likely to adjust them for every client.
2. They often have a greater adjustment range than manually-adjustable tables.
3. You can change the height for different techniques, such as moving from light to deep work during a session.
4. When you reposition your client into a side-lying or seated position, you can lower the table to account for the change in the height of the client's body relative to you.
5. You can raise or lower the table to allow mobility-impaired or shorter clients to more easily get on and off.