

# The Ergonomic Gourmet: Tips for Injury-Free Cooking

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**The holiday season should be a fun time, and you'll enjoy it more if you care for yourself. Try these ergonomic cooking tips for a safe and happy holiday!**

## **The Right Equipment:**

As is true of most undertakings, using the right tool for the cooking task can help the job go faster and more efficiently while preventing injury and conserving the energy of the cook.

- **Knives:** Keep your knives sharp. A dull knife is more likely to slip and cause injury. A sharp knife is easier to control and requires less force to cut the intended item. That said, if you are new to using sharp knives, use extra-super care to avoid cutting *unintended* items such as your fingers.
- **Cutting board:** Use a sturdy cutting board that will not move as you cut. You can keep a cutting board stationary by placing a piece of non-skid drawer liner or some flat rubber jar openers beneath the board.
- **Special tools:** If you're zesting, use a zester. If you're coring use a corer. Whisking? A whisk. You get the idea. These and other items are designed to make special tasks easier. And they work best when they're in good condition.
- **Ergonomic utensils:** When selecting tools and utensils, look for those with ergonomic grips that protect your hands from harsh edges and unnecessary pinch forces related to narrow, slippery handles. Check to see that they fit your hands well. Not every "ergonomic" item will be right for you.

## **The Right Height:**

The type of task helps determine the optimal work surface height.

- **Power tasks:** For heavier work such as chopping, kneading and rolling dough, consider moving the work to a surface that is lower than your elbow level, such as a kitchen table instead of the counter. This may give you better leverage. Make sure the table or other work surface is stable and won't tip. Refine your standing height by bending your knees and/or adjusting the width of your stance.
- **Precision tasks:** If it's important to see the task and use coordinated hand movements, place your items at or above elbow level. Examples: measuring, paring vegetables, decorating cookies.



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## **The Right Technique:**

No matter the task, strive to minimize your risks of injury by planning, preparing your environment and being aware of your position and movements.

- **Hand position:** Stirring food can promote awkward wrist and shoulder postures due to raising your arm up over the edge of the bowl or pot and angling your hand down toward the food. Try holding your hand the other way, with the thumb side of your hand up - and let your elbow rest closer to your body. You may also be able to use a lower working height.
- **Body mechanics / oven:**
  - Transferring items into and out of the oven can be a risky lifting task. Risk factors include not only bending and lifting a weight, but also:
    - Awkward positioning – reaching into the oven.
    - Heat – of the oven and the object you're moving,
    - Possible shifting load. If it's a turkey or roast, you may be dealing with a moveable hot object and scalding liquid that may splash or slosh in the pan.
  - Use good lifting strategies, including the following:
    - Plan the lift
      - Prepare the destination (where are you going to put the item?)
      - Clear the path – make sure there are no hazards – slippery floors, unexpected objects, people or pets – to trip you up.
      - Get help if needed – ask someone stronger to do it, or have someone handle the oven door or rack for you.
    - Use good, sturdy potholders or mitts.
    - Wear sensible shoes; use a broad stance; bend from the hips and knees and not from the waist or back.

**With careful choices of equipment, working height and techniques, you can be an Ergonomic Gourmet and keep your holidays merry, bright and safe.**

Nancy M. Lowe is a Certified Ergonomist, Registered Physical Therapist and Certified Hand Therapist with over 20 years of experience treating and preventing injuries. For more ergonomics information visit <http://www.pacificcoastergo.com>

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