

Working from Home in the Face of a Pandemic – Applying Ergonomics Principles



This is a post from April 30th, 2020, reflective upon the COVID-19 pandemic, but the ergonomic principles mentioned are still applicable for telecommuters and office workers looking to remain compliant and keep their work habits healthy.

In the face of a pandemic, many people are now being asked to perform work duties from home. This includes both employees who may be accustomed to working from home and have a dedicated home office, as well as employees who have never worked from home and lack a dedicated space.

It is an opportune time to review some key ergonomics principles to help ensure that you can work from home in a safe and productive manner and do not incur a sore neck or back due poor working conditions. You do not want to have to visit a doctor for a musculoskeletal disorder that could have been prevented by implementing the following workstation set up guidelines.

1. Select an appropriate work location

If you don't have a dedicated home office, how do you pick the best working spot?

Consider picking a spot with a table or work surface that is 27-29" high. Any higher, and you may find an increase in shoulder and neck discomfort that comes from working on a work surface that is too high. It is also worth considering where in your home you can concentrate without too many distractions $\frac{3}{4}$ that is, unless you are also supervising children while you attempt to get your work done. If this is the case, try creating a daily schedule for your children to follow, and schedule their daily dose of TV and movies during the time when you are most productive or have the most critical work/meetings to complete.

2. Select the best chair available

In an ideal world, this means a fully adjustable office chair that you can adjust to your stature and that allows you to vary your posture during the day. If you don't own an adjustable office chair, take stock of your kitchen, dining room, and other chairs and pick a chair that provides back support, allowing you to sit upright (hip to back angle of 90-110 degrees) with your upper body weight supported on the backrest. If your chairs have slightly different seat heights, pick the chair that, when you sit on it, places your seated elbow height as close to level with your work surface height as possible. If your work surface remains slightly higher than your

seated elbow height, consider tilting your keyboard slightly (using the feet on the back of the keyboard) to promote straighter wrist posture. Keep in mind, that the less "ideal" your seating, the more often you need to get up and move around.

3. Find a footrest (if needed)

Once you are seated, take a look at your thighs. They should be parallel with the floor, with your feet firmly planted. If you are of average stature or shorter, there is a good chance that you would benefit from use of a footrest. A stack of legal -sized copy paper, or a large flat book are options you can use while working at home if you do not have a footrest.

4. Use external devices

The CSA Z412-17 Office Ergonomics Application Standard for Workplace Ergonomics states that laptops should not be used for prolonged computer entry, unless they are docked or connected to external input devices. Working directly off your laptop results in a monitor height that is too low and increased strain on the neck. The only exception to this is for bifocal lens wearers who view the screen through the bottom portion of their lenses and find a low monitor much easier to see. For those who do not wear glasses, or whose lenses are a single prescription, raise your laptop on a stack of books so the top of the screen is close to being level with your eye height and plug in an external mouse and keyboard.

5. Move around

Ensure that you are getting up from your desk every 30-60 minutes to stretch and walk around. The less "ideal" your workstation set up, the more often you should be getting up and changing postures. Consider whether you can stand and pace around your space while on telephone conferences. Another option, is to place your laptop on a kitchen counter or on top of a filing cabinet to create a standing height workstation for short periods of time. You can even invert a baking pan or use your butcher block cutting board to raise the height of the counter slightly. The goal is to position the keyboard as close to standing elbow height as possible, but for short periods of 15-20 minutes, the height does not need to be perfect.

6. Protect your mental health

Working from home can be isolating, especially if you are used to being in an office surrounded by your peers. Make a point of checking in with your colleagues by telephone for more complex issues, rather than starting up a long chain of email, and consider video conferencing options as well. Finally, don't forget to get out for a daily walk to ensure you have a reason to get dressed and get some fresh air every day.

Above all, stay safe and stay healthy.

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