

# From the kitchen to the couch

## 7 ergonomic tips for employees working from home



As companies require more and more employees to work from home due to the coronavirus pandemic, it's important to consider the ergonomic work environment of these workers.

### 140%

Increase in telecommuting since 2005.<sup>2</sup>

### 33%

Percent of workers' compensation claims attributed to musculoskeletal disorders in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

### USD 20bn

Approximate direct cost of MSDs to the U.S. economy.<sup>1</sup>

Many people have migrated to laptops, tablets and mobile phones in recent years. Wireless access has led many employees to become accustomed to working from the couch, kitchen table or even in bed. Although convenient, these work environments can be extremely problematic and lead to injuries, especially after prolonged periods of time.

### Musculoskeletal disorders

The increased use of computers has increased musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) in the workplace. Prolonged sitting, poor posture, poor desk set-up, and an increasingly obese population have all been a contributing cause to MSDs and increased costs to businesses. In the U.S., MSDs account for 33% of all workers' compensation costs, with a direct cost of approximately \$20 billion to the U.S. economy.<sup>1</sup>

Telecommuting has increased 140% since 2005, nearly 10 times faster than the rest of the workforce.<sup>2</sup> In addition, 40% more U.S. employers offered flexible workplace options than they did in 2010. Still, only 7% make it available to most of their employees.<sup>3</sup> This last figure is clearly changing in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

As more employers move to offer remote work options, MSD risks may increase. Employers should help provide workers with the tools they need to follow ergonomic best practices when telecommuting, thus helping to reduce this risk.

Sharing basic ergonomic tips for a safe remote work setting can help your employees now and when they return to a more traditional work environment. This will also place you ahead of the curve and enable your existing remote workers to be more efficient and knowledgeable while helping to reduce the potential of future work-related injuries.

## Basic ergonomic tips for home workers

Although working from the couch, kitchen table or bed may feel comfortable and convenient, it could lead to inherent stresses that can result in excess fatigue, discomfort and workers' compensation claims. If your employees will work from home, they should have a dedicated workspace that includes:

1. A suitable work surface
2. Proper keyboard and mouse placement
3. Appropriate position of screen/monitor
4. Seating that provides supportive posture
5. Headset for telephone use
6. Adequate lighting to reduce eye strain
7. Micro stretch breaks to reduce fatigue

### Good working postures

These should include neutral body positioning that allows the employee to work comfortably while naturally aligning joints. The following are important considerations when working from home to ensure neutral body postures:

- Hands, wrists and forearms are straight, in line and roughly parallel to the floor.
- Head is level, forward-facing and balanced; generally, it is in line with the torso.
- Shoulders are relaxed and upper arms hang normally at the side of the body.
- Elbows stay in close to the body and are bent between 90- to 110-degrees.
- Feet are fully supported by the floor; a footrest may be used if the desk height is not adjustable.
- Back is fully supported with appropriate lumbar support when sitting vertically or leaning back slightly.
- Thighs and hips are supported and generally parallel to the floor.
- Knees are about the same height as the hips with the feet slightly forward.
- The back of the lower leg, or calves, do not rub against the front of the seat pan, or bottom.

## Practical short-term options

For workers who are temporarily or irregularly working from home, there are practical options that will allow good working postures and neutral body positioning without significant and costly equipment purchases.

### Work surface

Use a firm work surface, such as a TV tray or table, that is ideally fixed and approximately 29 inches tall. You could also place a pillow on your lap with a solid tray on top to place your laptop.

### Keyboard and mouse

A separate keyboard and mouse are ideal when working from home. However, if they are not available, the laptop keyboard and mouse should be positioned in a way that keeps your elbows to your sides and your arms at or below a 90-degree angle.

### Screen and monitor

The monitor should ideally be approximately an arm's length away and parallel with line of sight so eyes land on the address bar on the screen. Use risers, books or reams of paper to obtain the appropriate height.

### Seated posture

In the absence of a good adjustable chair, you should at least ensure your back is supported, feet rest flat on the floor and your knees are at an approximate 90-degree angle. Use reams of paper or a stack of large books as a footrest.

### Headset

If you are frequently on the phone, consider using a cellphone with earbuds or a proper phone headset that will allow you to speak while maintaining good head and neck posture. If neither is available, use your speaker option on your phone if you are in the appropriate surroundings.

### Lighting

If your temporary work area is too dark, consider using a small desk lamp and opening the windows or blinds if practical and will not create excessive glare.

### Stretch breaks

To reduce fatigue from prolonged sitting, take a break at least once an hour by standing up and walking around your home. In addition, consider using basic neck, back, arm, hand and finger stretches.

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## References

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