WFH | Office Ergonomics 101: Stay healthy while working from home

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If you’re anything like the author of this article, chances are you’re working in a makeshift home “office” consisting of a “desk” that you dug out from months of (mis)use as a paperwork stack holder, slouched over your laptop and squinting to decipher what’s on the screen. Or, you might have chosen to plop down on your couch, feet up, and using various props from around the house to try and balance that iPad or tablet on your knees.

Working from home – for many of us at least – means making do without a variable height desk and an office chair with a whole bunch of adjustments (including several we never quite figured out), an external monitor and keyboard and ergonomic mouse with wrist support pad.

"Keeping our employees safe and healthy while they work at home is our top priority right now," says Charity Madrid-Torres, a health and safety specialist with Risk Management Services [1]. Her unit offers resources to help employees and students maximize the ergonomics of their home office. (See a list of resources at the end of this article.)

"The main thing right now is to work as best as possible with the things you have at home," Madrid-Torres says. "For many people, that means getting the best out of furniture that isn't adjustable in the same ways that you might be used to from your office on campus."

Listen to your body

An ergonomic work environment is a matter of inches and adjustability, she explains, "and the environment should be adjusted to you, not the other way around. What works for you may not work for another person."

In other words, small things can make a big difference in how comfortable home office users are while working remotely, and it's worth paying attention to how you can get the most out of the setup you have to stay healthy, happy and productive.

The good news: Even if your home office lacks the sophisticated furniture you might have in your workspace on campus, there is a lot you can optimize by following a few basic guidelines and paying attention to your situation as a whole, Madrid-Torres says.

The most important thing, she says, is to move. A lot.

"After every 30 minutes that you're working, get up for five minutes and walk around," Madrid-Torres says. "Now is the time to do all those little chores to break up your sitting routine. Throw in that laundry, grab a healthy snack or, at the bare minimum, do some stretches."

Madrid-Torres stresses that frequent small breaks are good not only for your muscles and bones, but for your eyes and mind as well.

"If you feel you're on a roll, it's OK to stretch your work session out to 45 minutes or an hour," she says, "but make sure you pay attention to how you feel – and do those stretches."

It's important to stay within your limits, she says, and, if in doubt, "check with a physician."

"But the best you can do is move constantly throughout the day," she advises. "For example, if possible, don't make phone calls while sitting at your desk. Walk around."

Ergonomics by the numbers

Madrid-Torres strongly suggests paying attention to good posture while seated.

"Try to make sure that whatever chair you are sitting in supports your back as much as much possible. Your feet need to be flat on floor. Sometimes it can help to place a couple of books or a box underneath them.

Some other good rules to follow:

- Your hips and knees should be at a 90-degree angle. The same goes for your elbows, upper arms and hands.
- Your head needs to be upright, with your ears in line with the shoulders. When working on a laptop, the user often ends up sitting too far away, or the screen is too small and we push our head forward, stretching over your shoulders while hunching, and that can create pain and even headaches.
- Ideally, your display should be at eye level and at a distance of within an inch or so of the fingers on your outstretched arm."
What about those of us who either don’t have space for a dedicated home office or simply prefer a more nomadic approach – alternating between setting up shop on the couch, the patio furniture and the kitchen table (asking for a friend)?

"A stand-up desk or a sophisticated ergonomic office chair aren’t necessarily the only options to work in a way that doesn’t compromise your health," Madrid-Torres says. "If you’re working on the couch with your feet up, that’s OK, as long as you try to sit up in a straight position as much as possible. Most importantly, make sure your shoulders are straight and rest them against the back rest. Take a couch cushion or pillow, or a small laptop desk to raise it to nearly eye level. The main thing is try not to hunch if possible, and if you find yourself hunching, then get up every 30 minutes and stretch, walk around, drink some water."

Watch the light

Lighting is an often overlooked aspect of an ergonomic workspace. Madrid-Torres has recommendations for that as well.

"You don’t want your laptop or computer screen directly facing a window or any light source where you get a glare. You don’t want lighting bounce off your screen. Depending on how well lit your area is, it may be good to partially close the blinds," she says.

"Adjust the brightness on your screen to the most minimal possible, to medium or low, to where you can still see the screen, but it’s not bright. Do the same with your smartphone or tablet. Too bright of a screen puts strain on your eyes. The light levels in your room should be moderate, as well. For working, ambient lighting is best."

Maintaining good health while working from home doesn’t start and end with ergonomics, though, Madrid-Torres points out. "What you should avoid at all cost is having your body frozen in place. The point is to keep it mobile. Move, drink a lot more water and eat a healthy diet – all those things help in keeping your muscles pliable."

Sleep is extremely important to avoid tension and strains, she says.

"If you sleep on your back, you may want to place a pillow under the knees, and if you’re a side sleeper, put it between your knees, as it helps align your back."

While working from home won’t be permanent, it’s a good idea to make the best out of it, she says.

"Work with what you have, and keep moving."

Downloadable Documents (all are PDF files)

- **An Ergonomic Self Assessment Tool** – How to assess your workstation and make simple changes for an ergonomic setup.
- **Work Ergonomically** – Tips for preventing back pain.
- **Ergonomic Checklist** – No matter the location, good ergonomics can help employees stay healthy.
- **Ergonomic Stretches** – Twelve quick stretches to do every hour.

Resources on the Web

- **Four Tips for the Perfectly Balanced Laptop** – With a more portable and compact computer comes a new set of ergonomics challenges. Follow these four tips to help you address them.
- **Tips for Taking Work Home** – Here are some tips to improve your comfort when working from home.

Videos

- **The Ergonomics for Working from Home** – An informative video from Humantech on how to set up your home workspace.
- **Home Office Ergonomics** – A video from Steve Meagher, the Ergonomics Guy.
- **Laptop Ergonomics** – Basic tips on laptop use for adults and children at home, work or school.

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Links

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[2] [https://risk.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/Ergonomic%20Self%20Assessment%20Tool.pdf]
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