



Ergonomics and Working from Home



The Coronavirus pandemic has caused many more employees to work remotely than ever before. While some essential worksites remain open and fully staffed, others have all or staggered remote schedules for workers. While this greatly lowers the risk of COVID exposure for workers, it can present a number of challenges to working safely and comfortably from home, and even increase the risk for repetitive strain or other similar injuries. How do we best set up our home or remote worksites to lessen the chance of suffering those types of injuries?

Too often, workers who try to fit into the space and equipment they have, rather than adjusting the space to better fit themselves. Think of this as fitting the worker to the job. This can lead to awkward and uncomfortable postures and eventually to repetitive strain injuries. To rectify this, we rely on **Occupational Ergonomics**, (which means the science of work) to help. Using Ergonomics we can design work systems, processes, tools, equipment and tasks that take into account variations in the size, shape, strength and capabilities of working people/Think of it as fitting the job to a person.

In an office or fixed work location, it may be easier to have a proper ergonomic set up at your desk there, compared to working from home or alternate remote location. But there are solutions, such as these quick tips to help improve your at-home workstation:

- 1. Work from a table or desk.** Working from a couch can be tempting, but it is important to work from a surface that will allow you to build an ergonomically correct workstation. This may be a dining room table, a personal desk, or any mid height table.
- 2. Utilize a supportive chair.** If you have an adjustable office chair available to you, take advantage of it and use it. If not, find a chair with a full back and a rounded or soft front edge to the seat. You want be able to sit all the way back in the chair, to fully support your back, your thighs should rest on the chair evenly from your hip to your knee, feet flat on the ground, and make sure the back of your knee is not rubbing on a hard front edge. You may wish to use pillows or rolled up towels for a lumbar support, seat cushion, or back rest.
- 3. Working from a laptop.** Laptops were created to be portable. It is very convenient to have your computer fold up and go where ever you go. However, many workers are now using them as their primary workstation while working remotely. Laptops tend to be less adjustable and smaller work- surfaces than fixed computer stations.



If possible, use your laptop as a monitor and raise it up with a laptop stand, box, or binder to bring the top of the screen parallel with your eye sight. Then use an external keyboard and mouse to complete your workstation, similar to an office setting (as pictured to the right).



If you do not have the supplies and equipment to do this, rest the laptop flat on the table and recline the screen until you are able to sit upright without tucking your chin to see the screen.

- 4. Keep items of need in close proximity.** Supplies you need to do your daily tasks should be kept close to you. Your keyboard, mouse, and monitor should be in your immediate reach. Other items that may be nearby are your phone, paper, pen, and documents you are currently working on (as pictured to the right).



- 5. Remember to take frequent breaks.** The CDC recommends frequent breaks of 5 minutes or less. These breaks can be as simple as standing and shaking out your hands and wrists for a few seconds, or cupping your hands over your eyes to give them a break from the screen. While working from home you should remember to take these breaks throughout the workday.



Posture while Working from Home

Begin setting the position of your chair (see the figure for points of reference)

① Feet:

- Place your feet flat on the ground, slightly in front of you. If your feet do not reach the ground, place a foot rest or box under your feet that is high enough to allow your feet to firmly touch the top.

② Knees:

- Your knees should be at an angle greater than 90 degrees, having your feet out in front of you helps you get into this position.

③ Hips:

- If you are sitting against the back rest of your chair, your hip angle should be at 90 degrees (upright) or slightly greater angle (slightly reclined).

④ Back:

- Make sure your back is fully supported by the chair. The back rest should support up to the shoulder blade at minimum. You can use a towel roll to create a lumbar support if needed.

⑤ & ⑥ Arms:

- The shoulder should remain in a relaxed position. The angle of the elbows should also rest at greater than 90 degrees while working.



⑦ **Wrists/Hands:**

- Hands and wrists should remain straight and in a relaxed position.

⑧ **Head/Neck:**

- Your chin should remain parallel to the floor and table surface.

⑨ **Eye Sight:**

- The line of site should hit the top portion of the screen this can be achieved by reclining your screen when working on a laptop or the laptop can be elevated using a laptop stand, box, or binder with an external mouse and keyboard.

It is important that you pay attention to any signs of trouble from working in awkward or sustained postures. Early warning signs may include tingling, numbness, or pain in the wrists, hands, fingers, neck, buttocks, thighs, lower legs or feet. It is your body telling you that an adjustment needs to be made. By ignoring these early warning signs you put yourself at serious risk to develop significant problems later, such as carpal tunnel, tennis elbow, neuropathy and many other repetitive strain injuries.

The good news is that by making some adjustments, taking micro-breaks and the other good ergonomic practices mentioned earlier, you can help avoid problems down the road.

This factsheet and many others were developed and produced by the NYS Public Employees Federation Health and Safety Department. If you have any questions or need assistance with ergonomics or any other workplace health and safety issue, please contact the PEF Health & Safety Department at 1-800-342-4306, ext. 254 or at HealthandSafety@pef.org.

**Funded in part by a NYS Department of Labor Hazard Abatement Board
OSH Training and Education Grant**

Produced by the New York State Public Employees Federation

Wayne Spence
President

Joe Donahue
Secretary-Treasurer