

Home Workstation Ergonomics and Habits

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Working from home is a pain

The rapid switch to the majority of staff working from home amidst the pandemic has resulted in significant lifestyle changes. With the societal measures in place to keep us safe, most of us are more sedentary. Many are looking at screens for longer than usual, both for work and entertainment.

Makeshift workstations at home can promote poor posture. Prolonged use of these workspaces coupled with insufficient breaks can lead to headaches, dry eyes, eyestrain, and pain throughout the neck, shoulders, wrists, and back.

General tips to reduce and prevent pain

- Change positions frequently throughout the day.
- Take a movement break every hour.
- Apply the 20-20-20 rule. Every 20 minutes look at something 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds. Some of us may have natural cues in the environment that grab our attention (e.g., demanding families and pets). Others might have to set alarms.
- Remember to blink! Studies show we blink half as many times when we're reading or staring at a screen. Blinking helps your eyes stay moist. Have you noticed your eyes feeling more dry than usual? Artificial tears are available over the counter at pharmacies and can help.
- Increase the font size on your screen.
- Avoid screens close to bedtime – they can harm your sleep quality.

Basic positioning for computer use

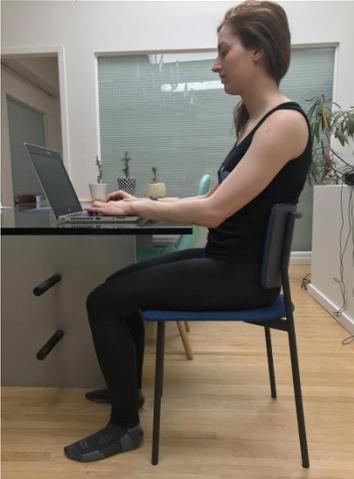
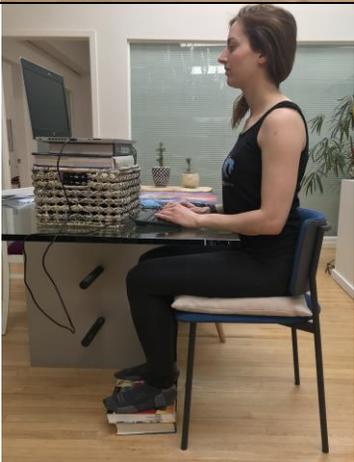
- Screen should be positioned at eye level.
- Keyboard should be at elbow level and elbows about 90 degrees.
- Keep wrists in a neutral position.
- Keep shoulders in a neutral position – ensure they are not hiked.
- Knees should be positioned at about 90 degrees with feet planted on the ground.

A word of caution about laptops

Laptop computers are one of the worst offenders when it comes to poor ergonomics. While they are great for when you are working for short periods of time and need to carry them around, they are not ideal for prolonged use. The keyboard and screen cannot be separated, which means it is impossible to achieve optimal positioning. They also often have smaller screens than a computer monitor, which can lead to eye strain.

How I modified my home workstation

Whether or not you have a laptop or a desktop computer, the same ergonomic principals apply. I personally use a laptop computer. I wanted to share how I was able to modify my workstation with everyday objects to make working from home more comfortable. I hope this helps you too.

	<p style="text-align: center;">Before</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Screen not at eye level, leading to hunched shoulders and forward head posture. Ouch! ✗ Keyboard is at elbow level but that angle is more than 90 – too obtuse for my liking! ✗ Feet could be elevated a bit to bring knee angle closer to 90. ✗ Knees should be at about 90 degrees when sitting. This is close, but I can do better.
	<p style="text-align: center;">After</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Screen has been raised to eye level using books and a basket. ✓ Keyboard is at elbow level and elbows around 90 degrees. I am using an external USB keyboard and mouse. ✓ Wrists are in a neutral position. ✓ Shoulders are in a neutral position. I had to put a pillow under my seat to raise my body to achieve this. ✓ Knees are at about 90 degrees. I have books under my feet.

When your workstation is not ideal

Not everyone has an external keyboard or mouse – I get it. I only have two USB ports on my laptop, so when I have to use a USB drive or my headphones, my ideal set-up collapses. When this happens, I try to achieve the best positioning possible for the task at hand. For example, during video meetings where I’m not doing much typing, I make having the screen at eye level a priority and don’t worry so much about the keyboard position.

If you cannot make your workstation ergonomic, it becomes even more important to take movement breaks and change positions. The benefit to working from home is that you can stretch or walk around whenever you want to. Enjoy the freedom! When my kitchen counter is not in use, I move my workstation there for an hour and stand. I do a lot of my reading on the couch. Find the balance that works for you.

Disclaimer: Recommendations are not individualized and thus must be interpreted with caution and may need to be modified to address your personal needs. Some of the recommendations shared above may not apply to persons who have an underlying health/medical condition, physical impairment, visual deficit, or who use assistive technology. Some people may require more individualized support. When in doubt, consult with your occupational therapist, physiotherapist, low vision specialist, or other health care provider.