



# How to Set Up a Home Office That Works for You

Ergonomics experts offer tips on how to stay pain-free while working from home

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Many of the tens of millions of workers told to work from home to stop the spread of the coronavirus have found themselves in makeshift workstations without proper desks, chairs, computer monitors, keyboards or lighting.

They may be hunched over kitchen tables, sitting in straight-back chairs or pecking away at laptops in less-than-ideal lighting. Even worse, some are working from couches and beds.

"A lot of the people currently working from home have never worked from home and don't have the proper setup to work from home," said Christine M. Sullivan, senior vice president, risk control services director at Sompo Global Risk Solutions based in New York City. "Setting up a proper workstation is going to help minimize the potential ergonomic injuries to the back, neck and shoulders."

Bad posture while working at a computer is a leading contributor to stiffness and soreness, back pain, and "tech neck," that ubiquitous bent-neck position used when focusing on digital devices.

To reduce the risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders, experts suggest the following ways to set up your work-from-home station.

## Your Posture

Sullivan outlined some ergonomic posture basics for desk workers:

- Hands, wrists and forearms should rest in a straight line, roughly parallel to the floor.
- Shoulders should be relaxed, with arms hanging normally and elbows kept close to the body.
- The head should be facing forward and balanced level on the neck.
- The back should be straight and vertical or leaning back slightly, with the lumbar region, or lower back, well-supported.
- Hips should be at an angle of 90 degrees, with thighs approximately parallel to the floor, knees at approximately the same height as the hips, and feet resting on the floor or supported by a footrest.

Standing is also OK when the worker's legs, torso, neck and head are approximately in line and vertical.

"The worst offenders are people trying to work from their couch or bed," Sullivan said. "You will never get proper support on your couch or bed."

Experts agree that varying your posture throughout the workday is critical. The key is to break up the workday with stretching, walking and a variety of postures, said Karen Loesing, an ergonomic consultant and owner of [The Ergonomic Expert](#) in Agoura Hills, Calif.

Sullivan advised, "It's easy to fall into the trap of sitting at your desk all day. If you're on a conference call, stand up, move around a little bit."

Ryan Pavey, president of [BakkerElkhuizen USA](#), a Dutch company that designs workplace-ergonomics products, recommended setting an alarm to go off every 50 minutes, then getting up and taking a break for the remainder of the hour. Some experts recommend standing and stretching every 20 minutes.

Loesing pointed out one bright side to working from home: "One of the nice things about being at home is being able to sit and stand and mix it up."

Sullivan added that at-home workers should try to eat lunch in their kitchen instead of at their desk.

"Computer users should also be encouraged to perform frequent stretching exercises of the fingers, hands, arms and torso," she said.

## Your Workstation

Pavey said that newly remote workers should first find a dedicated work area. "Find somewhere in your home where you can work as ... if you were working in the office. Somewhere with good natural light is ideal."

The quality of illumination is one of the most important environmental considerations for a home-office computer workstation, Sullivan said. "Glare from light fixtures or windows reflecting on the display can wash

out images, making it difficult to clearly see the screen, and lead to eye fatigue. Arrange workstations to minimize glare from overhead lights, desk lamps and windows," she said.

The most critical component of your workstation, other than being in the best location in your home to set up shop for the next couple of months, is the monitor and keyboard. "The key barrier to working comfortably with a laptop is that everything is in a very small package, with the result being that we start to lean into the laptop," Pavey said.

"The monitor is the key to everything," Loesing said. "You want to look straight ahead while you are working."

Sullivan explained that the monitor screen should be directly in front of the user. "Positioning the monitor off to one side forces the user to twist his neck or torso. The top of the screen should be positioned at eye level or just below eye level. This permits the head to be balanced on the neck, level or bent slightly forward."

Options for newly remote workers who were unable to prepare for working from home include using a home desktop computer, purchasing a new monitor, appropriating a monitor from the office, or buying a wireless keyboard and mouse and raising the laptop to eye level in order to prevent hunching.

"If you're willing to spend a little money, the wireless keyboard and mouse is the No. 1 must-have for remote workers," Sullivan said. "Then you can set your laptop monitor to the correct height." Loesing suggested that an inexpensive laptop riser will allow the laptop monitor to be brought to eye level. Books will also do the trick.

"Some people are getting creative and have plugged their laptops into the HDMI port on their television in order to use their TV as a monitor," Sullivan said.

She added that traditional telephone use can also contribute to the development of musculoskeletal disorders, especially with frequent or prolonged use. "Prolonged conversations with the phone pinched between the shoulder and head may cause stress and neck pain." She recommended using a hands-free headset or headphones.

## Your Seat

Ergonomic chairs are relatively expensive, and many people who are used to them at the office may not have one in their home. Loesing said it's important to learn how to use your chair if it's adjustable. The height of the chair should allow your feet to be on the floor or on a footrest. The back of the chair should be adjusted so that the lumbar support is positioned slightly below your belt line.

She explained that the average kitchen table is too high to be ergonomically sound. Chairs should be raised so that your elbows are at the same height as the table, and a footrest should be used if your feet are dangling.

"A lot of people perch at the edge of their chair because the table is too high," Loesing said. "If you have a footrest, it pushes you back in your chair so that your back is supported."

She said a slight recline when sitting is preferable to sitting up straight. "Most people think, incorrectly, that they should be sitting with their back at 90 degrees," Loesing explained, but a slight recline will take the pressure off your hip flexors.

Sullivan added that placing a rolled towel behind your pelvis for lumbar support or a thin pillow on your seat can make an ordinary chair much more comfortable.