Working from Home Safely and Effectively

If you're just beginning working from home, or perhaps this is the first time you've worked from home full time, you may be concerned about how to set yourself up to be both productive and comfortable while working. Fortunately, a little attention to the principles of ergonomics can help to create a safer and more effective work environment. Best of all, you might even be able to use items you already have at home.

Define your workspace. Set yourself up in an area that is free from distractions. For example, set up your workstation in the bedroom as opposed to in the family room. If space is limited in your home, you might need to get creative.

Mind the cords and clutter. Aisles and walkways should be free of cords and other items that could pose a tripping hazard. Also, make sure you have an adequate number of electrical outlets, and use a surge protector for your equipment. Keep clutter at bay as it can restrict movement and lead to more twisting/reaching. Similarly, be sure that there are no obstructions underneath your desk to interfere with your leg room, so that you can fully face your task.

Resist the urge to work from the floor, the bed, or the couch.

Look at lighting. Be sure your ambient lighting adequate; this is particularly important if you tend to frequently reference printed documents. To reduce the discomfort of glare on your computer, locate the screen so it is not facing a window and does not have a window directly behind it.

Take breaks. Remember that taking breaks are important in the home office just as they were in the physical office. While you might experience fewer interruptions when working from home, that could mean longer periods of repetitive work. Remember to take your regular breaks (e.g. lunch) as well as microbreaks throughout the day. Microbreaks are 1-2 minute breaks every 15-20 minutes. This time can be used to stretch and exercise the muscles.

Set a routine. Try to keep a routine that is similar to when you went into the office. Take a shower, get dressed, make a cup of coffee, and go to your dedicated work space. You'll be glad you showered after the first time you need to attend an impromptu video conference meeting.

Working at home with children. You may be facing an added adjustment of working with young children at home. While each family may have to find what works for them individually, it may help to define a schedule for yourself and your children. As an example, if your most productive time is in the morning, try to get some of your most important or difficult tasks done before the children wake up. Easier/shorter tasks can be accomplished later, as you have smaller pockets of time throughout the day. If you are a night owl and have the flexibility to work outside of normal business hours, aim for an earlier bedtime for the kids.

It can also help to work just after the kids have had a good session of physical activity/play time. Take them for a long walk, play in the backyard, or use an online exercise program for kids. Once they've expended their energy, they are more likely to focus on quieter tasks and allow you some working time.

Keep up the communication. Maintaining interaction and teamwork with your colleagues is very important and may take a bit more effort when you begin working from home. At first you might appreciate the lack of disruptions from impromptu meetings, colleagues stopping by your office, or the water cooler talk, but it's important that you not become out of sight, out of mind. Be sure to communicate regularly via email and phone and make use of video conferencing technology as well. It may feel awkard at first, but it really can promote greater engagement and foster teamwork.

Physical Set-up

While sitting, your thighs should be approximately parallel to the ground. Ensure your feet are firmly supported by the floor or a footrest.	*If necessary, use a sturdy box or even reams of paper to elevate your feet.*
Ensure your lower back is well-supported by the chair's backrest or a back cushion. Ideally, you should be able to rest back against your backrest rather than leaning/perching forward for long periods.	*Use a cushion or a pillow if necessary.* *If you cannot reach the backrest because your seat pan is too deep, use a cushion or pillow (or consider a different chair).*
Ensure your keyboard and mouse are at approximately elbow height. Ensure the keyboard and mouse are close to you to minimize reaching.	*If the keyboard work surface is not adjustable, adjust your chair to achieve an appropriate typing height. Ensure your feet are well-supported by the floor or a footrest.* *If your chair is not adjustable and it is too low, prop up your chair seat with a cushion. Ensure the cushion does not push up against your thighs or into the back of your knees.*
If you have a laptop, the use of a full-size keyboard, monitor, and mouse are suggested as accessories to your laptop. There is more flexibility in the set-up if the keyboard, monitor, and mouse are independent pieces. **If the pieces are set-up appropriately, allowing you to work in healthy postures, you should experience less physical stress.**	*If you do not have an independent keyboard, monitor, or mouse, adjust the keyboard to your ideal typing height (approximately elbow height) and tilt the screen backwards slightly so you can view the screen comfortably by looking downward with your eyes as opposed to bending your neck and dropping your head forward.* *If you have an independent keyboard/mouse but not a monitor, you can position the keyboard/mouse at your ideal typing height, and then position your laptop so the screen is also at an appropriate height.*
If you have a desktop computer, position your monitor(s) so you can view the screen with a straight head/shoulders/hips alignment. You should not be dropping your head forward or tilting backwards.	*If you want to raise your monitor, use books or reams of paper.*
Maintain a neutral wrist posture while typing.	*Avoid dropping your wrists on the work surface while typing. Instead, float your hands above the keyboard. If necessary, support your wrists with a wrist pad or a rolled up towel. Make sure the towel is not higher than the home row of your keyboard and that it will not place too much pressure on your wrists.*
Avoid holding the phone between your ear and shoulder for long periods.	*If you use the phone frequently, consider the use of the speakerphone option or a headset.*