

ERGONOMICS... BEYOND THE TYPICAL OFFICE WALLS

Leann Perault, PT, MS, CEAS



Many people have suddenly found themselves working at home amid the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are one of those who is now working remotely, you might find that your makeshift office is a literal pain in the neck. Many people don't have proper office chairs or set-up and working for extended periods of time bent over at your kitchen counter or sitting on your couch is not great for your body and overall health.



Here are some "Take Home Tips" to help you get through the next few weeks. Your body will thank you.

✓ **Sit with your back and feet supported:**

One of the most important ergonomic risk factors for office workers is lack of low back support. Try to make your chair as comfortable as possible. If you are someone who struggles with back pain, try supporting your spine with either a pillow or a rolled towel placed between the chair and your lower back. You can also try a rectangular pillow placed upright from your lower back to your shoulders to help support the entire spine. If you are sitting on a hard kitchen chair, place a thin pillow or folded towel on the seat. Try different options. Use what feels like it supports you best and is the most comfortable for productive work.

✓ **Support those feet:**

While sitting, your hips and knees should be at about 90-degree angles. If your feet can't be placed comfortably on the floor, try using a three- ring binder (angled toward you) to support your feet. Dangling your legs can cause a lack of circulation after a while, so keep your feet supported.

✓ **Keep your head up:**

The average human head weighs 10-12 pounds. When you are looking down at your laptop or phone, your head is forward on your spine and places a lot of pressure and tension on your neck, which can cause pain. Ideally the top of your monitor should be at eye level or just slightly below. If you have actual monitors, adjust them accordingly and try tilting the top of the monitor slightly back. If using a laptop, you can try to sit your laptop on some books or boxes to elevate it so that the top of the laptop is at or slightly below eye level for times when you are reading the screen. If you must type on your laptop keyboard, lower it down close to elbow level and try to keep your neck and spine as straight as possible. Try to avoid hunching over and leaning your head forward.

✓ **Relax your arms:**

Your best option is usually to use an external keyboard (not the one on your laptop) if you have one. Keep your keyboard at or slightly below elbow level, with your shoulders relaxed. If you are using the one on your laptop, try to have it at about elbow level and tilt the screen back slightly so that you do not have to lean forward to view it. Remember to give your hands and wrists frequent breaks. Don't keep a death grip on that mouse!

✓ **Change your posture often:**

Remember that your body is never meant to stay in one position too long. Doing so limits circulation and can cause tension in the joints and muscles. Try sitting and working in different chairs if you do not have a dedicated space. Prop your feet up occasionally or try standing up while you are on a call. Feel free to alternate positions every hour or so, or at least get up and move.

✓ **Give your eyes a break:**

Your eyes need rest too. Follow the 20/20/20 rule. Take a 20 second break every 20 minutes by looking at something 20 feet away. Close your eyes, take a deep breath, then return to your focus.

✓ **Get up and move:**

Our bodies are made to move! We may forget to move and walk as much when working from home. Remember to stand up, walk, stretch, for at least one minute every 30 minutes. Stretching not only improves blood flow, but it can also reduce stress and tension in our bodies.