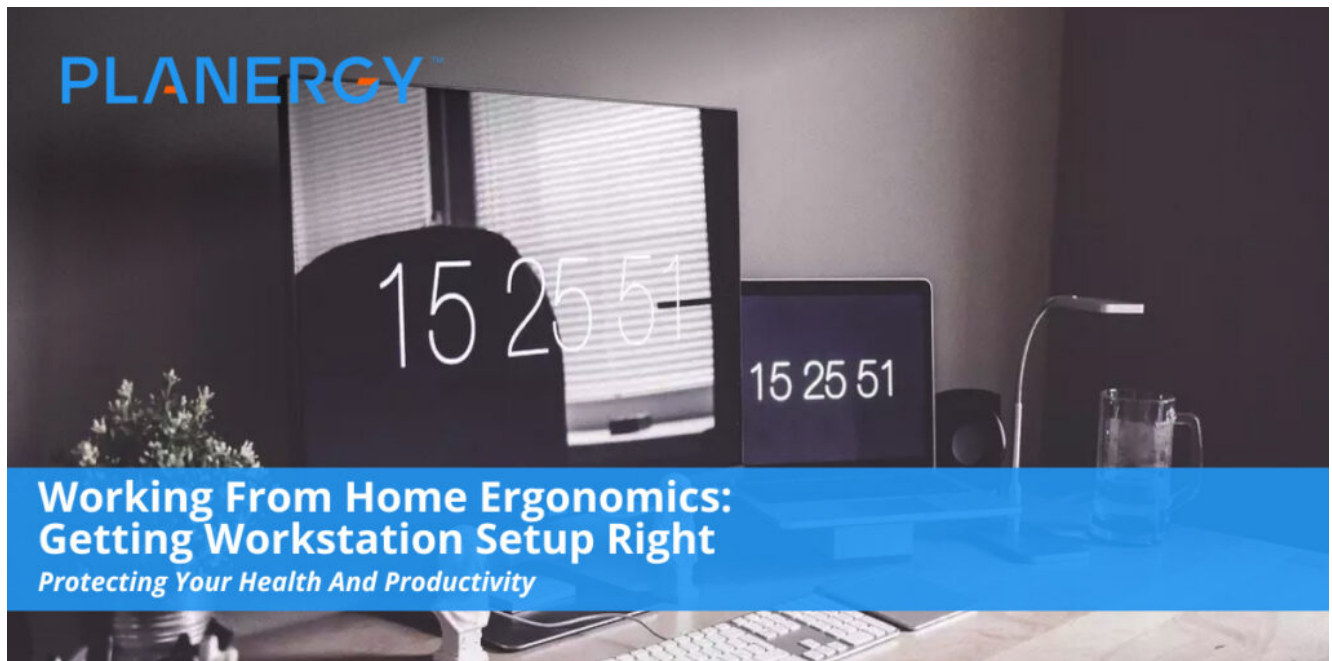


Working From Home Ergonomics: Getting Workstation Setup Right



Working from home—once a relatively rare phenomenon reserved for dedicated freelancers, specialists, and those who simply couldn’t make it to the office for a short period—has become the new standard for millions of folks working across the globe.

A variety of factors, from the COVID-19 novel coronavirus pandemic (and its attendant scramble to preserve productivity with remote work) to the long-term effects of digital transformation on business practices has more of us working from home than ever before.

One of the primary challenges that comes with this surge in remote work is the fact that most home offices—while comfy and familiar—likely lack the office ergonomics you’d find back at HQ.

Long hours on the sofa or a folding chair, struggling with a laptop and a TV tray, or trying to wedge yourself into an improvised workspace can quickly wreak havoc on your health *and* productivity.

Upgrading your home office with “working from home ergonomics” can help ensure you’re getting the job done without sacrificing your long-term health,

happiness, and efficiency.

Why Working from Home Ergonomics Matter

The science of ergonomics is built around adapting working conditions to protect the health, productivity, and efficiency of workers.

Its goal is to ensure staff can do their jobs without undue risk of injury, and, perhaps more importantly, ensure equipment and facilities promote long-term efficiency and safety.

Sitting at a desk or standing at a machine for long hours can contribute to a number of health issues, including a range of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) that can, if left untreated, lead to other health issues or even prevent a person from engaging in everyday life tasks.

A non-ergonomic work environment can contribute to other health problems, too, including eye strain and circulatory issues.

Consequently, both governments and industry policymakers have a vested interest in providing ergonomic working conditions not just to preserve the efficiency, occupational safety, and productivity of their staff, but to protect their health—and insulate organizations against legal action that might arise from team members experiencing long-term effects from a non-ergonomic environment.

Professional offices are designed to incorporate these concepts, and meet health and safety standards.

In the United States, the Department of Labor publishes its own ergonomics best practices encouraging employers to provide “a safe and healthful workplace for their workers.”

Home offices, however, are another matter entirely. Often improvised (particularly if you’re not accustomed to working from home), a bit slapdash, and lacking the variety of equipment and tools offered by a traditional office, home offices can be as elaborate as a dedicated room with a full complement of computer gear and accessories, but they’re more often a space on the couch and

a work-issued laptop.

Screens are too high or low; tiny laptop keyboards and trackpads offer cramped capabilities compared to their full-sized equivalents; posture is often, at best, an afterthought.

If you're working from home and aren't quite lucky enough to have access to a 30-Rock style office replication service, responsibility for setting up a work area that helps you avoid microtraumas (tiny, repetitive strains that can lead to carpal tunnel syndrome, digital injuries, or back, shoulder, and muscular damage) rests squarely on your (hopefully squared) shoulders.

Following a few basic ergonomic tips can help you create a comfortable and safe home office that helps you get the job done without compromising your long-term health and productivity.

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Building a More Ergonomic Home Office

You'll probably need to invest a bit of time and money into setting up a properly ergonomic home office or work area. If you're lucky enough to work for an employer who offers a stipend for remote workers, you may be able to expense what you need and emulate your regular work area at home.

If not, you can still work to protect your health and comfort by integrating home ergonomics with your chosen office space.

Protect Your Spine

You might think of "good posture" as striking ramrod-straight, military-style pose that even the strictest librarian would applaud.

But the best position for your spine, and your health, is what's known as a neutral

spine, or one that retains its natural s-shaped curvature.

A neutral spine has three curves to its “S”: curving in at the neck, out at the mid-back, and back in again at the lower back.

This natural position takes the strain off your muscles whether you’re working at a traditional desk or using a standing desk. If you’ve noticed your back feels tight, you are experiencing back pain, or you simply feel “off,” you can work to regain your natural neutral spine position with a few simple stretches and posture adjustments.

To support your spine while you work, make sure you’re sitting in the right position, too.

When you’re seated in a chair, your feet should be flat on the floor. Your bottom and hips should be level, not tilted to one side or the other.

Keep your thighs parallel to the floor, and your knees at hip height.

Your arms need a little care and attention, too. Make sure your wrists are straight, with your hands at or below elbow height.

You should be able to slide your arm across the surface of your desk or work area without lifting your shoulders.

All this posture-related tinkering may be more easily said than done, depending on the equipment you have available, your desk and chair height, and your own physical needs.

Depending on your physical height and the length of your limbs, you may need to make finer adjustments.

For example, if you have very long legs, you may find that adjusting your chair to the right height has you slumping forward to type.

Investing in an adjustable desk, a laptop stand, or simply moving to a taller work surface (such as a kitchen island) can help.

Conversely, if raising the chair so you can reach your keyboard leaves your feet dangling, it’s time to invest in a sturdy and comfortable footrest, or add a keyboard tray under the desk so you can sit at the proper chair and elbow height

while maintaining your posture and keeping your feet on the floor.

Investing in an office chair with strong lumbar support can also help by encouraging you to sit with your spine in a natural “S” curve.

If you don’t have a chair with back support, try a small pillow or rolled-up towel, placed between the small of your back and the backrest of the chair.

Set up Your Computer Workstation Properly

Everyone has their own preferred work style.

But whether you’re using a laptop with an external monitor and a mouse or have a powerhouse PC with all the trimmings, your computer workstation needs to be set up ergonomically to keep you safe, efficient, and productive.

- **Placing Your Monitor:** A good rule of thumb when using any display is to make sure your eyes are tilted slightly downward when you’re looking at the middle of the screen. The top third of the screen should be visible without needing to bend your neck. Align the top of the monitor with eye level.

In addition:

- Place your monitor at least arm’s length away. This ensures you can see the whole screen without needing to turn your head. If you find text is too small to read at this distance, you can adjust your text size using your operating system’s settings.
- If you have a larger screen, you may need to move it further away to be able to see everything clearly.
- If you’re out of desk space and can’t move the monitor further back, consider moving the keyboard toward you using a keyboard tray.
- Adjust the tilt to reduce glare and maintain appropriate head position as needed. A tilt of 10 to 20 degrees is a good place to start, although you may need to increase that to 30 to 45 degrees if you have bifocals.
- Avoid direct light on the monitor. Indirect lighting protects you from glare, which can cause eye fatigue, headache, etc.
- If you’re using multiple monitors, make sure they are all aligned

properly and seamlessly (no gaps). If you're using flat rather than curved monitors, tilt them inward slightly to promote a cohesive, single-screen experience.

- If you're using a laptop, be sure to use a laptop stand or something similar to raise the top of the screen to the proper height. If this makes typing and mousing difficult, invest in an external keyboard and mouse to make sure everything's on the level.
- **Keyboard and Mouse:** Your mouse and keyboard should be within easy reach, without the need to over-extend any part of your body. Also:
 - Place your keyboard at elbow height. Your wrists should be straight and your upper arms close to your body.
 - Keep your keyboard close enough for comfort and proper typing; far enough away to sit without slouching, but not so far you hunch over. Using a wrist rest helps you keep it in the proper position.
 - Consider using your keyboard in "flat" mode to prevent wrist strain.
 - If desktop space is limited, using a mouse riser (similar to a keyboard tray) can provide a mousing area at the right height without sacrificing valuable desk area.

Ergonomic Success Depends on Your Desk

The right type of desk for your home office depends on your work style. Using a sit-stand desk can help you burn more calories compared to sitting and typing alone.

But if that's not your cup of tea, a traditional desk—configured ergonomically—can work just as well.

Of course, your desk may not be a desk at all; it may be a kitchen table, a kitchen counter, or even a repurposed shelf.

Regardless, what matters most is maintaining good posture and ensuring you have enough room to work while maintaining your ergonomic setup.

- Maintain a neutral spine position, whether you're at a standing desk or a sitting one.

- Pay attention to your body's signals. Discomfort, fatigue, and pain are signs it's time to adjust your posture or, better yet, take a break.
- Follow the same rules for ergonomic placement of your mouse, keyboard, and computer screen at a standing desk as you would sitting down.

Get Moving

A totally sedentary work day can be damaging to your health for reasons that go well beyond posture.

Keep yourself moving and motivated by:

- Using a time management technique such as Pomodoro or Flowtime to provide measurable progress while building regular breaks into your workday.
- Use your break time to limber up. Try the National Institute of Health's Exercise and Stretches to shake out stiffness and lethargy.
- Make exercise a regular part of your day. An analysis of 13 discrete studies published in *The Lancet* found 60 – 75 minutes of daily physical exercise could effectively negate the damage done by a sedentary workday. However, even moderate exercise can help, so if you're not ready for a full hour, start small and work your way up in ten minute bursts—and don't forget to consult your physician before you engage in any kind of physical activity!

Working from Home Ergonomics Can Keep You Happy, Healthy, and Productive

Whether you're navigating life in the COVID era or increasing your remote work as part of your company's digital transformation strategy, working from home doesn't have to be a pain in the neck (or back, or wrists, or legs...).

Make sure you have the right equipment, set up a healthy work area, and pay attention to your body's signals, and you can make ergonomics a successful part of a healthy and productive working day.

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