Ergonomic Tips for the Home Office

There are times when an illness, bad weather, a sick child, or in the current environment—COVID19 guidelines, make it necessary to work from home. This may or may not be a common practice for you, or something you do frequently, regardless, it's important to understand that discomfort and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) risk factors can be even more abundant in the home than at the office.

You might be tempted to kick back and work from your couch with your feet up on the ottoman or bed with your laptop and a cup of coffee but either one leaves you susceptible to several risks that aren't present in a typical office workstation. Here are some tips to help you make the right decisions of where and how to set up your home workstation:

Tip #1. Take a good look at your environment

Select a work surface that best simulates a desk. Working at a kitchen counter or sofa might sound fine, but in no time, you'll find yourself in many awkward postures and positions. Make sure your workstation has ample leg space. Working in front of cabinets or drawers (i.e. if the kitchen countertop is the desk) will limit how close you can get to your computer/mouse/keyboard and may result in you leaning forward (back flexion) and/or reaching excessively.

If you have a desk, more than likely this will be your best bet for your computer and also for getting work done as most desks are located in a room separate from the kitchen and living room. This is important to limit distractions, so you actually get work done. If you have pets, you may want to close the door as having your dog or cat roam around or demand to play ball can easily take you away from your work. (I know this all too well as I have one dog and 2 cats, all of which seem to coordinate somehow and take turns on interrupting me. How they do that I still haven't figure it out!)

Tip #2. Think about your equipment

Are you comfortable at the office? Do you have a great chair, a sit-stand desk and a monitor that is height adjustable? If so, that's great. The challenge is to recreate that at home without bringing all of that from work to home. Assuming you're using a laptop, the first step is to use the laptop strictly as the monitor and to have a separate keyboard and mouse. This way the eye height will be independent from the forearm/hand height. This is vital to prevent neck, back, arm and hand issues.

Ideally your eye height should be about 1" below the top of the laptop. A no cost laptop stand can be made by stacking a few books or to use a box(es) to raise it to eye level. You could also buy a low cost laptop stand ([3M laptop stand](#)).

Once you've got your laptop (or external monitor) at the correct height, then turn your attention to your input devices, i.e. keyboard and mouse.
In case you need to buy those items or want to look at other options, here are a keyboard and mouse devices to consider. ([Logitech wireless keyboard](#) -doesn't have number pad; [Logitech wireless keyboard;](#) [Goldtouch Go! Keyboard](#) (looks and feels similar to a laptop keyboard); [Anker wireless mouse](#); [Logitech vertical mouse](#) (both keep wrist in neutral position).

Tip #3. Your Chair

Your chair at home is equally important as the one in your office. I'm not saying you need to have a fully adjustable, top of the line task chair. I am saying that it should be one that allows you to work with good posture. It should support your lower back. If not, roll up a towel and place it behind your back.

If your desk height is fixed, always adjust your chair height to your desk height. There should be a "*gentle waterfall*" from your elbow to your wrist/hands when they are on the keyboard and mouse, i.e. your hands and wrists are slightly lower than your elbows. If your wrist and hands are higher than your elbows, you'll end up reaching upwards for them by either hunching your shoulders or pushing the keyboard/mouse away from your body. Both are risk factors for increased tightness and discomfort in the back and upper extremities. If your feet don't quite reach the floor, grab a box (or old phone book if you still got one) and place under your feet.
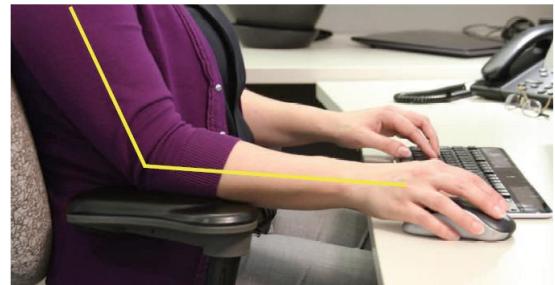
Tip #4. Good things to do
Here are a few more tips to ensure a productive and comfortable work from home experience:
- Take frequent "micro-breaks" (every 30 minutes, take 30-60 seconds to alter posture, get up from sitting, etc.
- Take advantage of conference calls by stretching, walking around the room or doing simple exercises (i.e. heel raises, balance on one leg, etc.)
- Use speaker or headphones (ear buds) for calls
- Stick to a routine. Your home work day should mimic your office day

Use a chair (not your couch/bed)

Sit back in the chair, use a towel roll if needed add more back support

Raise your laptop by using boxes or reams of copy paper

Keyboard and mouse should be on the same surface, elbows slightly higher than hands

Feet should be supported, use a box or book if needed
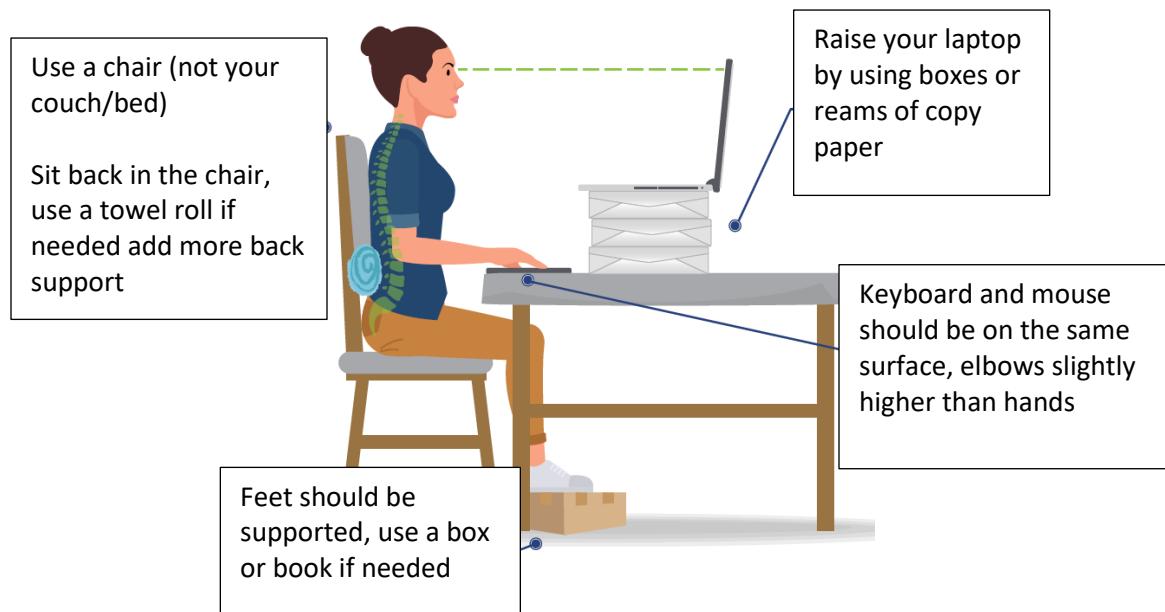
Working from home can be great as you can't beat the commute! However, there are some risks to keep in mind. Consider how you're working and take the necessary steps to minimize the risk factors will allow you to work comfortably and effectively whether you choose to stay in your pajamas all day!