

The COVID-19 outbreak has resulted in telecommuting generally being recognized as an effective business continuity and infection prevention strategy. Public employers in particular have discovered that some functions can be successfully maintained through remote operations. While working from home can benefit employers and employees; it can also create challenges. This Risk Alert reviews several of these challenges and proposes practical remedies to optimize safety and productivity when telecommuting.

Temporary Workstation Location

Issue: “I don’t have a dedicated office space that I can use while working from home.”

Options:

- Select an area in your residence that is relatively quiet and away from family and pet traffic. If possible, choose one with a door that you can close for privacy.
- Try to find a space with good ventilation and bright lighting. An outdoor view is also a plus for brain health purposes.
- If you are easily distracted by household or other environmental noise, consider wearing ear plugs or playing your favorite music. Be sure to talk with your family and establish boundaries to minimize distractions during your working periods.



Workstation Ergonomics

Issue: “I don’t have access to an adjustable workstation in my home office.”

Options: Use what you have available to get close to the optimal workstation configuration.

- Select a comfortable, structurally sound chair that supports your back while you are seated. A small pillow placed between your lower back and the back of the chair can improve your seated posture.
- Select a table or desk that offers you enough workspace. Try to find a surface that allows you to position your keyboard and mouse so that your forearms are bent at 90° in relation to your upper arms. Your hands and wrists should be level or slightly lower than your elbows when typing/mousing.
- Provide a cushioned wrist rest for your keyboard and mouse. You can fashion a makeshift wrist rest by rolling up a small towel. Lay this roll at the bottom of your keyboard and mouse. This will provide a soft rest area for your hands and wrists when they are not actively typing or mousing.
- Position your display so that it is roughly at arm’s length away and so that your level gaze falls near the top of the screen with your head and neck straight (vertical). If you need to raise your screen, use a sturdy cardboard carton, books or equivalent to get to the optimal height.
- If your feet do not touch the floor while you are seated, use a foot stool/rest for support. If you do not have access to a foot rest, consider using a pillow or sturdy cardboard carton.

Risk Alert: Injury Prevention When Telecommuting (Cont.)

- If you have access to a high table or counter, you might consider a standing desk configuration. You will want to position the keyboard, mouse and display as configured for a seated workstation. Since long periods of standing can also be fatiguing, alternate between sitting and standing throughout the day, if possible.
- Whether using a seated or standing desk, be sure to locate all office equipment and materials within easy reach.

Phone Cradling

Issue: “Sometimes I cradle my cell phone between my head and shoulder to free up my hands for other tasks.”

Options: Repeated neck/shoulder cradling of a phone can lead to discomfort. One no-cost solution is to motivate yourself to stop the behavior (go “cold turkey”). Hold the cell phone with one hand instead of cradling. Other options include using the phone’s speaker function or corded/wireless ear buds or a head set.

Smart Phone Posture

Issue: “My neck gets sore when I use my smart phone for extended periods.”

Options: Many smart phone users hold the phone close to their bodies when interacting with the device. This causes them to flex their neck and look down for extended periods. The resulting neck posture (“chin tucking”) is associated with neck discomfort. As with phone cradling, the no-cost solution is to recognize the undesirable behavior and raise the cell phone to eye level so that the head and neck remain in neutral, vertical posture. Since this posture may cause your unsupported arms to get tired during extended phone use, consider sitting and resting your elbows on a table. This will support your arms while you hold the phone at eye level.

Lighting

Issue: “Poor room lighting makes it difficult to see work documents and images required for work.”

Options: When the existing light fixtures in a space do not provide adequate illumination, consider adding a task light to the workstation. Place a spare lamp adjacent to the area where you need to improve the lighting. Direct the resulting light downward or keep the shade in place to reduce glare.

Slips, Trips and Falls

Issues: “I’m concerned about potentially tripping on personal stuff laying all over my makeshift workspace.”

Options: Keep your work area clear of potential slip, trip or fall hazards. A decluttered environment whether at home or work can not only prevent slips, trips or falls, but it can also reduce mental distractions and help make you more productive.

Extension Cords

Issue: “I rely on extension cords to power my workstation; however, I hate to have the cords running across the room.”

Options: When using temporary extension cords:

- Inspect extension cords prior to use to ensure the insulation is intact and the plug has a third, grounding prong. Do not use damaged extension cords as they can result in a shock or spark an electrical fire.

Risk Alert: Injury Prevention When Telecommuting (Cont.)

- If possible, locate extension cords around the outer perimeter of the room instead of running them across high traffic areas. Taping cords to the floor is another potential option but in some cases the tape adhesive may damage the floor or carpet.
- Never “hide” extension cords under rugs where they might become damaged from “wear and tear” and where damage may remain hidden from view.
- Do not use extension cords with space heaters and other high amperage electrical equipment. To prevent potential electrical fires, always plug this type of equipment directly into a wall outlet.

Breaks

Issue: “I find myself spending most of my workday on the computer. Is there a recommended break schedule to stay healthy and maintain focus?”

Options: While there are no definitive mandated break schedules when performing computer work, public health agencies generally agree that periodic breaks are recommended. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests taking several short breaks throughout the day (about every hour) and trying to incorporate movement into the break. Here are some examples of healthy break behaviors offered by the CDC:

- Take a short walk away from your workstation.
- Stand up and stretch or walk in place at your desk without looking at your computer monitor.
- Get out of your chair whenever you take phone calls at your desk.
- Change positions at your workstation.
- Have a drink of water or a light snack.

Additional Questions

For questions regarding this Risk Alert, please contact the Trust’s Risk Control Department at 215-706-0101.

Sources

U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. “Computer Workstation eTool.” *United States Department of Labor*, www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/computerworkstations/index.html.

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U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Five Minutes or Less for Health Weekly Tip: Take a Break.” *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, 1 April 2015, www.cdc.gov/family/minutes/tips/takeabreak/index.htm.