



Mental Health  
Commission  
of Canada

Commission de  
la santé mentale  
du Canada

Opening Minds

# Temporary Work at Home Ergonomics Guideline

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The purpose of this guideline is to help support the mental health of workers by reducing the potential for negative effects of poor ergonomics in temporary work at home situations, particularly during critical events that require temporary work at home for a prolonged or undetermined duration.

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## Purpose

During a critical event, some or all workers in an organization might be required to work at home for a period of time. This is not a business as normal situation. The duration of work at home may vary and may be unknown, depending on the nature of the event and the nature of the work. It can be difficult for workers to adapt, particularly if the situation has affected multiple workplaces, schools and community supports.

While a worker may seek comfort while working at home temporarily, it is important to understand that comfort does not always minimize risk, particularly if the worker is in deep focus or if their “comfortable” position is the result of poor posture. It is also important to recognize that a worker may feel the need to push through a task despite discomfort or pain.

Practicing good ergonomics in temporary work at home situations can be quite challenging. However, it is important, because ergonomics can affect a worker’s physical and mental health, and their ability to function in work and personal situations.

Management and workers need to work together to ensure good ergonomic practice in a temporary work at home situation. In many cases, workers may not have an “ideal” set up to facilitate work from home as they might in a permanent work from home situation. Even if the worker does have a home office, in cases such as a critical event that affects multiple organizations, there may be others in the home sharing that space.

A worker may have a home office with a good ergonomic set up or they may be working at their kitchen table, or on their couch, in another room of the home, or even on their floor. Requiring a worker to have a typical office ergonomic set up could increase stress for a worker who does not have access to the space, equipment or privacy to have such a set up. However, supporting the ergonomic needs of the worker with consideration of the other challenges they may be dealing with can help to ease the strain on the body and mind in situations where workers may be working in less than ideal set ups.

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# The Connection Between Ergonomics and Mental Health

Protection of physical safety is one of the workplace factors outlined in the National Standard of Canada on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.

The Standard states:

*Protection of physical safety is present when a worker's psychological, as well as physical safety, is protected from hazards and risks related to the worker's physical environment.*

An organization that protects physical safety would be able to state that:

- a) The organization cares about how the physical work environment impacts mental health;
- b) Workers feel safe (not concerned or anxious) about the physical work environment;
- c) The way work is scheduled allows for reasonable rest periods;
- d) All health and safety concerns are taken seriously;
- e) Workers asked to do work that believe is unsafe, have no hesitation in refusing to do it;
- f) Workers get sufficient training to perform their work safely; and
- g) The organization assesses the psychological demands of the jobs and the job environment to determine if it presents a hazard to workers' health and safety.

Ergonomics is the science of fitting the workplace to the needs of the worker. It is intended to contribute to enhanced productivity and worker wellbeing by reducing discomfort, pain and the risk of musculoskeletal injury (MSI) and other work-related injuries.

The physical factors involved with ergonomics involve posture, repetition, duration and force. Activities that involve high repetition, excessive force, or holding a posture for an extended period of time, can increase the stress on joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments, bones and possibly on organs (e.g. heart, lungs, eyes, ears, brain, etc.). It is important to be aware of the stress on the body and its affect on physical and mental health.

For example, increased discomfort and pain can result in a cycle of increased fatigue, irritability, and difficulty focusing, which can result in lower quality work, increased risk of errors and longer time spent working than intended, all of which can add unnecessary psychological and physical stress. If physical and psychological stress from poor ergonomics spills over into a worker's personal life, this can add additional stress and perpetuate the cycle.

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# The Connection Between Ergonomics and Mental Health

Practicing good ergonomics in the temporary work at home situation will help to reduce the risk of discomfort, pain and injury and improve the worker's ability to focus.

This is particularly important when dealing with critical event response:

- **Because stress is cumulative, and the worker may be dealing with other physical and psychological stresses in response to the situation; and**
- **There may be waves or intermittent periods where temporary work at home may be required.**

In a temporary work at home situation, it can be challenging to balance the organization's responsibility to provide a safe working environment with the worker's privacy, personal preferences, other challenges of working at home in a temporary situation, and the worker's personal resources and responsibility for their own health and safety within their own home.

The worker should clearly communicate with their supervisor and/or health and safety committee to identify ergonomic needs and how to address them. There may be equipment that is provided by the company, and other equipment or items that the worker has access to in the home that can help to improve their ergonomics and support the worker's physical and psychological health and safety.

# Recommended Guidelines

There is no ideal set up that applies to every person, because every person's interaction with their work environment is different. However, there are general guidelines that can be extrapolated for temporary work at home situations.

The most important thing is to be aware of the interaction between your body and your work set up to avoid developing chronic pain or injury.

## **Awareness of Personal Needs**

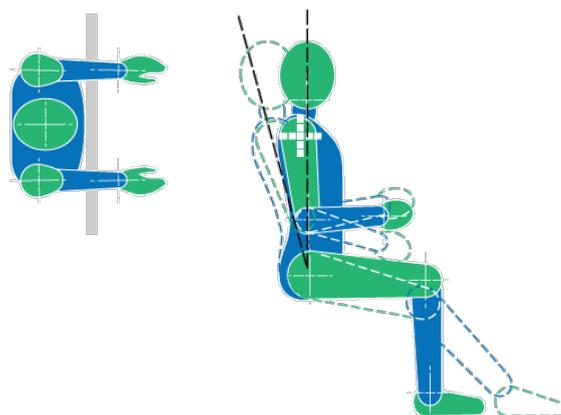
- Take frequent breaks (e.g. every 20 to 30 minutes) to move around and get the blood flowing, especially if your setup is not ideal. Use a timer to remind you if necessary.
- Attend to personal needs for eating, hydration, washroom, fresh air, light, rest and rejuvenation, etc. Take your breaks and lunch away from your work.
- Set boundaries for workspace – try to work in one area if possible, to maintain the boundary between work and home. If that is not possible, that's ok. If possible, try to put work away when you are done for the day. This will also help with resisting the temptation to work all the time and will help lower the stress of seeing your work in your personal space.
- When completing work for the day, use a ritual to signal to your brain and body that you are done. In the regular workplace, we tend to have a shutdown ritual and time to shift our thoughts between work and personal life. When working at home, we may not have time or space for the shift. Establishing a brief ritual will help, such as putting work away, standing up, clap the hands together and declare “I am finished work for today.”.
- Schedule time blocks work and for personal needs – this can help with ensuring you take the time needed for both. Try not to work on one thing for more than 90 minutes (research shows that productivity decreases after 90 minutes and ends up increasing the time needed and the risk of errors).
- Try to minimize noise and distractions as much as possible.
- If you find music calming or helpful to improve mood or concentration, use it. If necessary, use earbuds or headphones to block out other noise or prevent others around you from being distracted or irritated with your music.

# General Guidelines for Computer Work

- Be aware of your posture. Try not to slouch.
- Try to maintain a neutral posture when possible.
- Arms should be supported in a comfortable position (e.g. shoulders should be relaxed, and arms should be fairly close to the body with elbows bent, not extended).
- Position the keyboard so that wrists are as straight as possible, vertically and horizontally. Use a wrist support if needed. (A rolled towel or pool noodle cut in half also work).
- Position the screen or monitor in front of you so you are facing forward with your neck neutral, and the eyes are looking slightly down (top of screen or monitor should be at seated eye level).
- Look away from the screen or monitor every 5 minutes and focus on something a few metres away or off in the distance to rest the eyes.
- Take frequent breaks from repetitive keyboarding or mousing.
- Do hand and wrist stretches and exercises daily.

## Computer Workstations

- If you have a computer workstation with a “proper” set up (e.g. desk, adjustable chair, height adjustable keyboard tray, mouse, and ability to adjust the height of your monitor), make sure to adjust them according to good ergonomic principles, as shown in the diagram below.



Source: CSA Z412-17 Office ergonomics – An application standard for workplace ergonomics

# General Guidelines for Computer Work

If you do not have a computer workstation with a “proper” set up, try to utilize the following guidelines.

## **Using a Laptop**

- If possible, try not to use your laptop on a surface that is too high. If your arms are too high, and your shoulders are raised towards your ears, you could experience tension in the neck and pain. Your shoulders should be comfortable, and your arms should not be extended for long periods of time.
- Try to use an external keyboard, mouse and monitor.
- If you do not have an external monitor, you may be able to connect your laptop to your television and use the television as the monitor and your laptop as your keyboard.
- Monitor should not be too far away, generally arms length, for ease of reading.
- Increase magnification or increase font size if necessary, to avoid eye strain and craning your neck.
- If viewing the laptop screen while using an external keyboard, put the keyboard in a comfortable position and put the laptop on a stable surface so you can view it with your neck in a neutral position and the top of the screen in line with your eyes. You might need to put it on a prop (e.g. books or a box work well).
- If not using an external keyboard, try to use a surface that brings the laptop closer to your body, so your arms are in a neutral position (not extended). Do finger and wrist stretches and take breaks to rest your neck and eyes. If sitting on a couch, bed or floor, you might consider propping the laptop on a cushion with your arms propped on cushions for support.
- To create an adjustable workstation without an adjustable desk, props can be used to raise or lower the laptop and keyboard (e.g. books, a box or bin under the laptop, using adjustable, stable ironing board, etc.).

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# General Guidelines

## Sitting Tasks

- Use an adjustable chair if possible.
- If you don't have access to an adjustable chair, use a pillow or cushion, folded blanket or towels to raise your body.
- If the chair is too high, use a prop to rest your feet.
- If the seat pan is too long from back to front, place a support behind your back (e.g. towel, pillow).
- Try to work in a balanced position with neutral posture (the spine is not bent or twisted).
- When sitting, use a comfortable seat that is not too hard or too soft.
- The seat should have a backrest for support.
- Use a back support if needed (e.g. a back rest or small cushion can help to provide lumbar support).
- If the chair is too low, raise yourself by sitting on a pillow, or folded blanket or towels.
- Visual tasks should be positioned to allow the neck and spine to stay in vertical alignment.
- Use a document holder. If you don't have one, you can make one using a clip and a holder (e.g. binder, book, cereal box, etc.)
- Avoid lifting materials and transferring loads when sitting.
- Avoid sitting in one position for too long. Alternate between sitting, standing and walking, and between various sitting and standing postures (e.g. reclining, forward tilting, and semi-standing). Props may be used to raise a laptop to allow for work in a standing position, if desired. Or simply take breaks from the computer or other work that requires sitting for extended periods of time. This will allow for the mind and eyes and other body parts to rest and rejuvenate.

## Reach

- Materials and equipment for carrying out tasks should be positioned within comfortable reach
  - Close to the body for frequent reach
  - Within arms length for occasional reach.
- For reaches outside arms length - careful reach using good body mechanics, using a tool, or getting up to reach the item needed is recommended.

## Lighting

- Optimize lighting needed for the task. Where possible, utilize natural light or general lighting.
- Task lighting may be needed for certain applications (e.g. reading, fine detail work, etc.).
- Avoid glare. This might mean moving to a different location, tilting or moving a computer screen slightly, adding an anti-glare screen to a laptop or computer monitor, or wearing sunglasses if working in bright sunlight.

## Communications

- If using a telephone, maintain neutral posture of the neck. Avoid cradling the phone between the ear and shoulder.
- If calls are expected to be prolonged or often, use a means of hands-free communication (e.g. speaker phone, headset, earbuds, etc.) that allows you to get up and walk around while on the call.
- Try to do calls from standing or walking.
- If communicating often on video-conference meetings, try to ensure comfortable seating with a solid surface to place the screen and camera on. Or prop the laptop so you can participate comfortably from a standing position.
- Avoid typing on a laptop on your lap or walking with the camera on as this is very distracting to others on the call as it causes the picture to bounce repetitively.

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## References

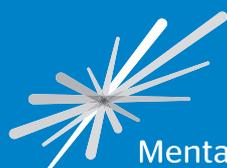
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[Ergonomic tips for working from home in Ontario during COVID-19, Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Inc.](#)



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