

Creating a Home Work Environment that Works for You:

Simple adjustments that you can make to be more comfortable while working from home.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many changes in the way that public entities conduct business on a daily basis. With a large percentage of employees across the State of Connecticut working from home to help flatten the curve, the home office has become a coveted commodity—unfortunately, not all homes offer dedicated office spaces. Because of this, kitchen counters, dining tables, living rooms, or bedroom spaces are doubling as home office spaces. Employees can also find themselves sitting on couches, recliners, or other areas not designed to support their body while working on a computer or laptop. While they may be comfortable, these areas do not allow the body to be positioned appropriately while using these devices and can lead to unwanted physical stress.

The focus of this whitepaper is to identify best practices for employees working from home who face the dilemma of finding a workstation that allows them to be productive while trying to utilize proper ergonomics. Creating a home workspace does not require you to make extraordinary upgrades to your home or even purchase fancy office equipment. Taking the time to set up a workspace with basic ergonomic strategies in mind is beneficial in many ways, including promoting productivity and focus, and helping to avoid discomfort and social isolation.

Here we focus on simple adjustments that you can make to be more comfortable while working from home. Adopting healthy behaviors and knowing what to look for when choosing the right space for you can improve your overall wellbeing while working remotely.

Location. Location. Location.

Like homes, people are unique. You may need to try several different areas within your home to find the space that is both comfortable and promotes productivity. While searching your home for that perfect space, you should consider whether the space offers privacy, adequate lighting, easy access to power, and enough room for your work materials.

Privacy. While working from home, privacy can be more difficult to achieve than in a normal office. This is especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic since there is a higher likelihood that you are not the only person in your home during the day. Interruptions caused by the lack of privacy can be frustrating.

Incremental adjustments can be made to decrease the level of frustration you may be experiencing. Try the following strategies:

- Using headphones or an earpiece can block out background noises.
- Weather permitting, sit outside during your work day. Not only will this remove you from your main household space, but will also allow you to get some fresh air.
- Looking for a quiet space? Take the meeting from your car. Some meetings require privacy, meaning you may need a space in your home away from others during your workday. Taking the meeting in your car can provide the quieter and secure space that is needed for your next important conference call.
- Consider setting up a schedule and discussing it with those in your home. This can let your family or roommates know that you have a scheduled call or work that requires your full attention.

The global pandemic serves as a sobering reminder that you never know what can happen. So it is essential to be flexible during this time and remember that situations may arise that require you to adapt. Below are some things to consider:

While it is essential to set up your workspace to be productive and comfortable, we can't forget to change our body positions. Staying still for long periods can increase the stress on our bodies and the feeling of isolation.

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Adequate lighting. Proper lighting is vital for your eyes. Lighting ensures that your eyes adjust properly, which makes it easier to read your computer screen or any other document that you need to reference during the work day. Consider the following when selecting a workspace:

- Select an area that is not too dim or too bright. Dim lighting can cause your eyes to strain—it can also lead to poor neck posture as you try to see the screen. On the other hand, too bright a light washes out images on a computer screen, causing the eyes to strain as well.
- While areas with windows have the added benefit of acting as a healthy distraction, try to position your monitor to reduce any sun-glare or light reflection, which can strain the eyes. If you notice a glare from artificial lights or the sun, you may need to reposition yourself, even if that is moving over just a couple of inches.

Position. Prioritizing the placement of work materials is essential. Selecting a work area where you can position your laptop, computer, and other materials in a manner, so you are not leaning, or over-extending your body helps to reduce strain.

While it is essential to set up your workspace to be productive and comfortable, we can't forget to change our body positions. Staying still for long periods can increase the stress on our bodies and the feeling of isolation. Yale University has created some simple tips to consider while positioning yourself for home office success:

- **Keep moving** — Even with the perfect office set up, you should not sit in a chair all day. Instead, take a break. Change your position, stretch, and adjust your chair when needed. Try making a change every 25-30 minutes. You can also switch between sitting and standing throughout the day.
- **Chin up** — Your head and neck posture are essential. Keeping your chin tucked toward your chest can lead to neck, shoulder, and back pain. Instead, you want to keep your body relaxed. There are a few updates you can make to your home office to help achieve the best position for your neck:
 - Adjust the position of your monitor.
 - Keep the center of the screen at eye level.
 - Use your headset if you have one.
 - Place your monitor on a surface to raise it to an eye-level position.
- **Adjust your posture** — Without realizing it, you might start leaning toward your screen. To avoid potential back pain, improve your posture. Remember to sit all the way back in your chair.
- **Reposition your chair** — Select a comfortable chair that will keep you from leaning forward and straining.

Clutter in your home can clutter your concentration. It is important to select a space with enough room to organize all of your work materials. Having enough space will help you maintain focus throughout the day, reducing the number of distractions associated with clutter.

Be smart with your smart devices. Many people are spending more and more time with tablets and smartphones, but these are not free of ergonomic stressors. Here are some things to remember when computing on the go:

- Texting and some other small-screen features can be hard on the thumbs. Limit typing time to no more than 10-15 minute sessions.
- Stretch often when spending extended time on your device.

Keep moving —staying still for long periods can increase the stress on our bodies.

Individuals must find a space that allows them to position their bodies in a neutral position. Being neutral means positioning yourself in a comfortable way that reduces any strain placed on your body.

- If you use a stylus, try to find one with a sturdy grip handle.
- Think about maintaining a neutral posture while on your device. You may elect to use something to support your arms so that you do not hold them aloft for long periods and maintaining a prolonged or bent-neck posture.

Access to power. With the essential use of technology in the workforce today, it is imperative that you can adequately power your devices. Here are simple things to take into consideration:

- Set-up your work station in an area with ample outlets.
- You may need to use a power strip to give you added outlets to charge all your devices.
- Keep your laptop charged so that you do not lose any unsaved work if your battery dies. Make sure to save your work regularly.

Internet or Wi-Fi. Almost more important than power is your ability to connect to your home's Wi-Fi. Be sure to:

- Test your Wi-Fi strength to choose a workspace in your home with strong signal strength.
- Change the default password on your wireless network to secure your Wi-Fi network from unauthorized access while working from home.

Making your space easier on your body with everyday items in your home.

Home office 101: Use books, boxes, or any other sturdy materials as risers for your monitor to achieve just the right level of height where the top third of your screen is in your direct eye line.

What is comfortable for one person may not be suitable for another. Because of this, it may be difficult to position yourself into an ergonomically neutral position of 90 – 90 degrees at the elbows and knees. Individuals must find a space that allows them to position their bodies in their neutral position. Being neutral means positioning yourself in a comfortable way that reduces any strain placed on your body. Here are some creative ways to use household items to assist in reaching your neutral position:

Find a table that is the right height for your body and posture. Start by sitting at a table or counter space. Place your keyboard and mouse down and adjust your monitor. Ask yourself:

- Can I rest my arms on the surface while keying?
- Do I have to reach to use the keyboard or mouse?
- Does the keyboard or laptop move while I'm typing?

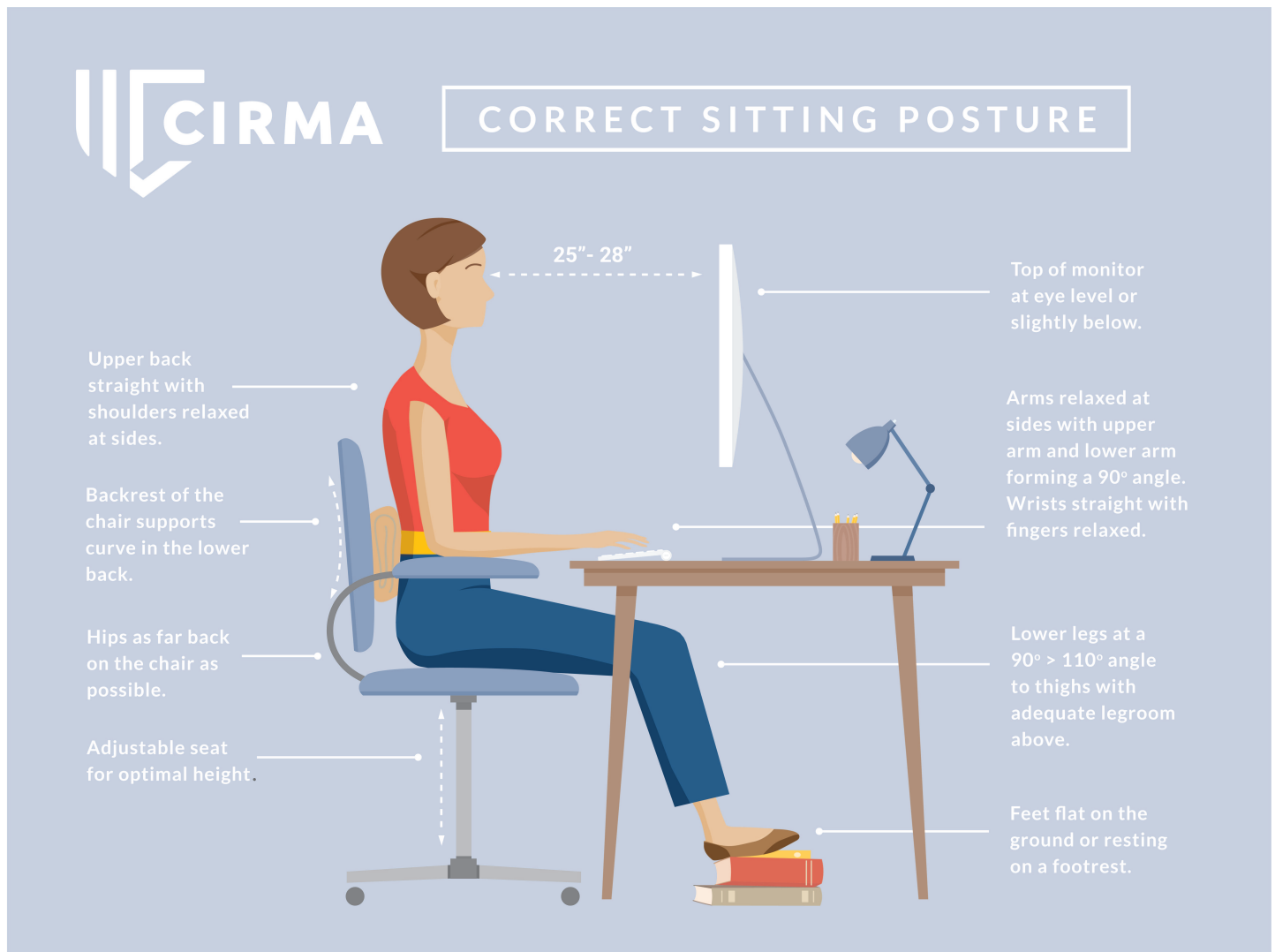
Ensure that you secure your keyboard and mouse from moving, and place them at a proper distance so that you are not overreaching or having to excessively bend your elbows to type. This will help to avoid aggravating your wrists.

Adjust the height of your monitor. Try to adjust your monitor to a height that will enable you to keep your neck comfortable. Try to achieve the ergonomic neutral position--this means your head balances directly over your spine and is not leaning forward or cocked to one side. (See Figure 1)

If available to you, use a desktop computer or a laptop with an external keyboard and mouse. These tools will allow you to raise your laptop or computer monitor independently and will help to keep your wrists in a neutral position at the same time as your neck. Keep your monitor at a height where the top third of your screen is in your direct eye line. You can use books, boxes, or any other sturdy materials as risers for your monitor.

If neither are available to you and your laptop is your only option – make sure to schedule regular breaks allowing you to get up and move around. Taking intermittent breaks will reduce the amount of time you are sitting in one position and assist with putting your body back into your neutral position.

Figure 1: Correct Sitting Posture



Pick a chair that is comfortable and supportive. It is not common to have a fully-adjustable office chair at home. It is important to select a chair in your home that can provide a sturdy base (unlike a couch or bed) while still being comfortable. The type of chair that you choose should depend on your height. While you may not have a chair that follows the exact guidelines placed by ergonomic experts, try to find one that promotes best practices:

- While seated, your feet should be placed flat on the floor or placed on a footrest—sturdy household items can be utilized if you don't have a traditional

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footrest on hand.

- Ensure your backrest provides lumbar support, and if the chair has armrests, they should gently support your forearms.

Here are some ways to adopt ergonomic ideals with items found in your home:

- Use a step stool, box, or another similar sturdy item such as a footrest if you are sitting at a chair that is higher up, like a bar stool.
- Place a pillow or folded up hand towel behind you for extra support.
- Use your table (if it is a proper height) as an armrest by pushing your computer farther back. Ensure that it is not far enough away that it causes you to reach.

Rotate between sitting and standing. The rotation between the two positions will help relieve stress and strain on your lower back and neck. There are ways to mimic traditional office equipment in your home. Using an *ironing board* or *countertop* as your desk can allow you to stand while still getting your work done. Another benefit of rotating between sitting and standing is that it promotes focus and productivity by removing the stagnancy that comes with sitting in the same spot for a full workday.

Things to Avoid While Working Remotely. There are a few simple tricks you can follow to avoid stress to your body, both physically and mentally. While working from home, do your best to avoid the following:

- ***Avoid the temptation of sitting in bed or on the couch.*** It may seem like the sofa is the best way to be comfortable, but it does not provide adequate support for your body.
- ***Avoid sitting with the back of your knees pressed against the edge of your chair.*** The pressure on the back of your knees over an extended period can decrease circulation and promote swelling.
- ***Avoid slouching.*** Paying attention to your posture is a simple way to alleviate stress on your body. Make it a habit to stretch and adjust your position at least once an hour.
- ***Avoid the feeling of isolation.*** Stay in contact with your coworkers. Use communication tools to maintain the daily relationships and conversations that you would typically have while in the office.

Behaviors to Adopt While Working Remotely. Prioritizing your mental health as you would your physical health is crucial for creating a positive work-from-home experience. Working remotely can make it challenging to stay engaged and cause people to focus on the uncertainty that the national pandemic has created for many of us. As the period of working remotely extends with no definite date of when it will conclude, the idea of “social distancing” can start to turn into a feeling of “social isolation.” Consider adopting some of the following tips and tricks to avoid this happening to you:

- ***Create and maintain a routine schedule.*** Sticking to a regular plan similar to one during an average workweek is important for various reasons. It will help this irregular work period feel more reasonable for you, and will also help when adjusting back to life in the office.
- ***Take breaks.*** It is essential to get fresh air, stretch your legs, and give your eyes a break from screens. Experts recommend taking short 1-2 minute breaks every 20 minutes to ease stress and promote productivity.
- ***Pay attention to your posture.*** Being mindful of maintaining an upright posture

Want more helpful information to help you manage your workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic? Visit CIRMACOVID.com

Ensure that you are adopting healthy habits and invest the time to create a sustainable home office that works for you—your health and happiness could depend on it.

For additional information on this topic, please contact your CIRMA Risk Management Consultant.

while working has benefits for your mental health along with reducing strain on your body. Sitting upright throughout the day can help you stay alert.

- **Separate home and work.** Set strict boundaries and restrict yourself from bringing your work into places of relaxation in your home, like the living room or bedroom. Once your work hours are over, close your computer and act as if you left your work at the office.
- **Stay connected.** Along with staying connected to friends and family, ensure that you are keeping up with your work relationships. Meeting and communication tools are useful in both professional and personal type meetups.

Conclusion

While the work-from-home order was put in place to keep everybody safe and healthy, it can be challenging on the body and mind. The feelings of uncertainty and isolation that come with the global pandemic can lead to unhealthy patterns – both physical and mental. While working remotely, challenge yourself to do all that you can to avoid these patterns. Pay attention to the habits that you are forming. Decide whether these habits are beneficial to your physical and mental health and if they are not, consider adjusting them in ways that make you feel more at ease. Try to use in-home alternatives to the traditional office equipment that is usually available to you to reduce physical strain on your body. Ensure that you are adopting healthy habits and invest the time to create a sustainable home office that works for you—your health and happiness could depend on it.

For additional resources visit [CIRMACOVID.com](https://www.cirmacovid.com) to keep informed of the latest information from your CIRMA Team.

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