

STAYING HEALTHY

for home workers during the COVID-19 outbreak

Better health at the heart of everything we do



Home working

The current COVID-19 pandemic means that many people are having to adapt to working at home for the first time.

For employees who have never worked from home before, this situation may present a number of challenges: from setting up an ergonomic, designated workspace to coping with the sudden loss of social interaction with colleagues.

Even for those who have experienced home working in the past, the restrictions on social interaction create unprecedented working conditions.

Drawing on our wide clinical resource – including specialists in mental health and musculoskeletal issues – we have created this support guide to help you remain happy, healthy, and productive during these difficult times.

This brief guide takes you through a home working journey, from making sure your workspace is set up properly, through to achieving the right balance between work and home life, and staying mentally fit, active and healthy.

1. SETTING UP YOUR WORKSPACE

Setting up the ideal workspace is an essential part of working at home efficiently.

However, in the current crisis many people will be working from home in less-than-ideal situations. But whether you are working from a home office or the dining room table, there are a number of ways that you can create a productive workspace at home.

- One of the most important factors when creating your home-office workspace is to aim to have a dedicated area to work from every day. Preferably, this should be an enclosed space (such as a study). However, for many people this is not an option, so aim to set up your workspace in a quiet area of your home.
- In an ideal situation, every employee should have an ergonomic chair and desk, as well as desk screen equipment that has been set up by an expert to ensure it has been configured correctly. However, this is unlikely to be an achievable reality for the many workers who now have to work from home. Below we have outlined a list of measures you can take to easily improve your current workspace:
 - » If you are working from a laptop, try and make it as much like a desktop computer as possible. Use an external mouse and keyboard, and use a screen lift (or, if that isn't an option, a pile of books) to raise your screen so that your eyebrows are level with the top of the screen.
 - » Consider buying a desk and a chair with ergonomic support, adjusting it so that your feet rest comfortably on the floor and the backrest gives you good support.
 - » If you are going to be spending a lot of time on calls, consider using headphones to avoid overusing or straining your arm or neck muscles.
 - » Try to work in a room that receives lots of natural light and, depending on how you normally like to work, you may want to add some background noise to recreate the general buzz of an office environment.



2. Establishing your routine

Most of us have a fairly regular daily routine on a work day. Establishing a similar sense of routine while working at home can help you to stay productive and happy at work – as well as helping you to feel some sense of security and control.

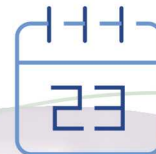
In the morning, wake up at a similar time as you would normally. Wash, shower, and brush your teeth as usual so that you feel ready for the day ahead. Get dressed – this could be into something comfy or your usual office attire. Avoid staying in your pyjamas all day!

Some people also find it helpful to create a daily 'commute' – go out for a short walk and when you return imagine that you are entering your office. Similarly, at the end of the day turn off all of your office equipment and leave the house, and when you return be clear that you are entering your home, not your office. With the current restrictions on leaving the house limited to one hour of outside exercise a day, this may be more difficult for many, but you could consider having short bursts of exercise before and after work to mark a beginning and end of the working day.

Please ensure that you only leave the house if you are confident that you can observe public health advice on social distancing: you must be able to stay at least 2m (6ft) from other people at all times, and do not congregate with others.



You might also consider packing all of your equipment away on a Friday evening so that your home is work-free for the weekend.





3. WORK-LIFE BALANCE

While working from home may be familiar to some, for a lot of people this will be a major change. Below we have outlined some steps to help with the work-life balance:

- > **Discussions with your manager:** A great place to start is having a meeting with your manager to talk about the realities of what working from home means for you. For each role and individual, this conversation will look different, but keeping open communication about your flexibilities and restrictions in your new set up will help your manager work with you to support this new work situation.
- > **Caring responsibilities:** Many people will have caring responsibilities that make maintaining normal working hours more complicated. Here is some advice from two working parents who have to juggle this challenge in normal times:



A working parent:

Identify which meetings will remain 'essential' (e.g. weekly team catch ups) so that you can plan with your family when you need to be working and which meetings can be adjusted to support caring duties."



A parent of young children:

Try to fit your schedule around your children (e.g. work during nap time or when their favourite TV shows are on). With older children you can get them to 'work with you', setting up the workspace so they can do their homework alongside you replying to emails."

- > **Communicating boundaries:** Many may find themselves not only working from home, but doing so with other members of the family or flatmates. Respectfully communicating boundaries so that you can remain productive can help everyone live and work together more easily. For example:
 - » Agreeing that work calls and virtual meetings are held in a different room so that others are not distracted.
 - » Writing down everyone's work hours and noting any important meetings or deadlines on a communal calendar that is placed in a shared space.
 - » Keeping work spaces separate from living spaces.



A home worker who is flat sharing:

I have the box room in a 3 person flat-share, so I'm not able to have much personal space. During the day, we all work in the living room, but in the evening I ask my flatmates for an hour to myself so I can exercise, creating much needed physical and mental relief."

- > **Social media:** Maintaining a minimal social media presence as you would do in an office can help keep you focused during work hours. Some advice from longstanding work-from-home colleagues includes:



A home worker:

I put my personal phone in another room so I don't automatically check it every time I receive a notification. I get up each hour to check any messages for a few minutes and this also helps keep me moving."



A home worker:

I use the app 'Stay Focused' to mute any news notifications until after 5pm when I stop work to keep me present in the office mindset."

- > **Sleep patterns:** Spending a lot of time in one space for both work and leisure may affect your quality of sleep, which will then affect your work. Creating a calming night-time routine can aid good-quality sleep, and mindfulness apps can support you to detach from work and move into a more relaxed state of mind. Try to wake at normal times, and don't look at your phone or social media for an hour before bedtime: the blue light from electronic devices will suppresses your brain's production of melatonin, a hormone that regulates your sleeping cycle.
- > **Non-screen activities:** Without the need to commute, you may find yourself with extra time on your hands in the evening. This can be a great opportunity to invest in a non-screen related activity, such as reading, jigsaw puzzles, or crafts like knitting, sewing or artwork.

- > **Eating three proper meals a day:** With your kitchen in easy reach, it can be tempting to graze throughout the day rather than make proper meals. However, taking a full lunch break and making yourself a balanced meal will help not only ensure that you are eating right, but also help break up the day. If you are not getting outside as much as you are used to due to the current restrictions, make sure you are getting enough vitamin D. The main source of vitamin D is normally from the action of sunlight on the skin, but it is also found naturally in oily fish, red meat, liver and egg yolks or available in vitamin supplements. Public Health England recommend that people consider taking a 10 micrograms (mcg) of vitamin D every day. Lack of time outside makes this advice more important.
- > **Staying in touch:** While normal social interactions are obviously constrained, make sure you put aside time to stay in touch with friends and family. Online or video meet-ups using WhatsApp, Facetime, Skype, Zoom, Teams or Google Hangouts are a great way to stay in touch, so you can see the faces of loved ones while talking to them. **Online get-togethers or drinks parties can work well:** one company we work with hosted a cheese and wine evening online for over 100 people. Much of this technology is free to use: if you are unfamiliar or not confident using it, find someone who can help you get used to using it. It really does make a difference.

4. MENTAL WELLBEING



Working from home and avoiding social contact is an important way that individuals can help lessen the effects of the current global pandemic. However, it is equally important to stay mindful of your mental health during this challenging time. There are a number of measures you can take to maintain your mental wellbeing:

- > While it is important to stay up-to-date with the latest news regarding COVID-19, only get information from trusted sources, such as the World Health Organisation and the BBC. Seeking information once or twice a day maximum can help minimise anxiety and distress in regards to the current situation.
- > While social media is an important tool for staying connected with colleagues, friends, and family, avoid using it as a source for news or updates, as gossip, rumours, and misinformation are frequently spread on these sites. Misinformation can be very dangerous.



- Avoid unhealthy coping mechanisms such as early drinking or unhealthy foods.
- Keep in contact with work colleagues throughout the day. Use phone or video calls as much as possible – even if the conversation could be carried out over email. This will help you feel less isolated. Make sure you schedule in time to talk with colleagues about non-work related issues, too.
- If you have the technology to do video calls, then use it. Face-to-face contact helps your communication and interaction with other people. Try having informal get-togethers as well as using these for work!
- Use your scheduled lunch break to get outside, if possible, as sunshine can have a positive impact on your mood. However, please ensure you stick to up-to-date Government guidance, and avoid public areas where you cannot maintain the social distancing requirements - currently, this is to stay at least 2m (6ft) from other people. Sit in your garden or on a balcony, if you have one.
- Make use of your Employee Assistance Programme, if you need it. Your line manager or HR team will be able to provide you with details of how to log in and use this support system. Other resources are provided below.
- Helping others can be a key part of maintaining our own mental health. Contact local charities (see the Resources box for more information) to see how you can help those who have been particularly affected by the virus, or get in contact with neighbours to see if you can offer assistance. However you help, make sure that you avoid physical contact with other people – especially the elderly or more vulnerable.



A home worker:

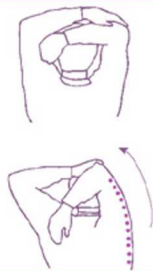
Stay active ...Whatever works for you but it makes a big difference to be able to break from work and reset your mind."

5. MUSCULOSKELETAL HEALTH

Despite the home setting, working in a safe way remains as important as in the office. We can advise to:

- Look away from your screen every 20-30 minutes and gaze out the window, allowing your eyes to relax for a few minutes.
- Make sure you have space to move, stretch and fidget.
- Move around your home space every hour, and complete a set of short stretches for your neck, wrists, shoulders, and hips, holding each movement for about 30 seconds. Stretches may include:

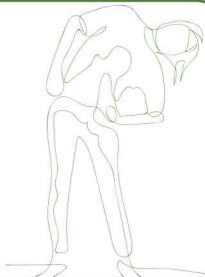
Reaching up
over your head



Bending slowly
to each side



Twisting your
upper body
(hands on hips)



Rolling your
shoulders



Shrugging your shoulders
(inhale and lift up, exhale
and relax)



Even if you cannot get outside, make sure you do some sort of proper exercise each day – enough to make you break a sweat, and use those muscles that aren't activated by desk-based working. This will keep you both mentally and physically healthy while your movement is restricted. There are lots of home exercise options available online, including on YouTube. For those with home exercise equipment that doesn't get much use, now is a good time to dust them down and start doing some exercise!



Further Resources

Mental health:

Websites for mental health charities such as Mind (www.mind.org.uk) and Anxiety UK (www.anxietyuk.org.uk) offer guidance on coping with mental health issues.

Exercise:

The Body Coach

Joe Wicks is offering live PE workouts for parents and children every day at 9am. There are also plenty of other home exercise videos available on his YouTube channel.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAxW1XT0iEJo0TYIRfn6rYQ>

Yoga with Adrienne

Adrienne has a 30-day challenge for beginners, as well as playlists targeting specific issues e.g. 'Yoga for Uncertain Times', 'Yoga for Neck Tension'.

https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene/featured?disable_polymer=1



Community

Now is a great time to get to build local community connections. Some activities you could consider include:

- > Checking in with elderly or more vulnerable neighbours, going food shopping for them, or giving them a call to keep company. Remember to maintain social distance, as they will be at the highest risk of serious health issues if they contract COVID-19.
- > Find ways to support local businesses who may have closed their shops but are still trading online, such as independent bookshops and restaurants.
- > Virtually donating to foodbanks. Apps such as bankuet have linked up with foodbanks across England to provide packages for each area's specific needs. You can donate £10-100 to your local foodbank and bankuet will donate the physical items on your behalf.