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# Looks like working from home is here to stay — here's how to do it without breaking your back

As we move out of lockdown, it appears that many workers will not be going back to the office. Physiotherapist **Michelle Lacey** has some tips to help minimise back pain

**T**hese unprecedented times have resulted in so many people adapting to working from home and perhaps in self set-up workstations. Consequently many may now be feeling aches and pains as a result.

In a series of articles about back pain, *The Lancet Medical* journal highlighted in 2018 that nearly all of us will suffer at least one episode of back pain in our lives, and for the many of us this will resolve with time. However, these articles also highlight that back pain is generally associated with sedentary lifestyles, such as desk-based occupations.

Follow these tips to make your current home workspace more ergonomic by creating a space that's easier on your muscles and joints so you can continue

to enjoy working from home.

## 1 SET UP YOUR COMPUTER AS BEST YOU CAN

It may be difficult to find the perfect set-up at home, however try to have the top of your monitor at approximately brow height, your keyboard at your fingertips with your forearms parallel to the floor, and your arms under relaxed shoulders. If you are using a laptop, take it off your lap and place the screen at eye level and consider using a separate keyboard.

Try to use a headset instead of holding a phone to your ear and finally stand and walk around when you can.

## 2 SET-UP YOUR CHAIR TO ENSURE YOU ARE COMFORTABLE AND RELAXED

*The British Journal of Sport Medicine (BJSM)* advises to sit in a relaxed position. There is no one single posture better than the other, with the key tip being to move between a variety of sit-



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ting postures such as, from an upright body to a rounded back.

### **3 MOVE AROUND AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE**

Again, the *B/SM* has recently advocated that back pain is not caused by the way we sit, stand or bend even if these activities are painful. Regular movement and changing of postures are healthy for your back.

For most people it is the sustained postures, where repetitive loading of the tissues and structures and muscles around the back and neck leads to irritation and then a pain response. It's important to move regularly from one posture to the next.

### **4 TAKE PLENTY OF ACTIVITY BREAKS EVERY 30 MINUTES**

By completing 60 seconds of activity every 30 minutes you will

increase your blood flow to the brain and muscles, this can also help release endorphins which help us feel good. There are huge benefits to this such as boosting your productivity, boosting your mood, and reducing stress and injury.

Examples of activity breaks include marching on the spot, squats or some of the following

mobility exercises: stand up and raise your arms over head stretching out your spine and then clashing your hands lean to the left and then right for 10-15 seconds each, in sitting bend down to touch the floor and roll back up to sitting three to five times and seated cat/cow (moving between an upright back to rounded back).

### **5 DESK STRETCHES AND EXERCISES ARE VITAL**

If you can't stand up, some desk stretches and exercises are a great alternative. Try each of the following for 15 seconds.

Gently rotate your shoulders in circles both directions, shrug your shoulders up and down, gently stretch your neck from side to side

(think ear to shoulder), turn to look over each shoulder, and finally twist and reach behind your chair to stretch your upper body.

### **6 KEEP ACTIVE TO REDUCE WORK RELATED ACHES AND PAINS**

The World Health Organisation (*WHO*) advocates that we complete at least 300 minutes of moderate activity or 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per week for good health. The *WHO* advise that this includes two or more days of muscle strengthening activities involving major muscle groups.

Furthermore, increasing your overall activity levels can help keep at bay work-related upper limb and spine disorders. Be sure to start off any new activity in a very gradual way and if you have a medical condition consult your GP first.

### **7 RECOGNISE OTHER FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE**

Research has shown that a variety of other factors can contribute to back pain and by trying to control these we may help reduce flare-ups and pain exacerbations. Stress, tension, worries, low mood and poor sleep may contribute to our aches and pains. Therefore, finding ways to decrease the negative impact of these may help reduce aches and pains in the body.

### **8 KNOW WHEN TO SEEK HELP FOR YOUR PAIN**

Remember back pain and flare ups do not mean damage and when discomfort persists it may reflect how sensitive your back is not how damaged it is. Exercise and movement are key strategies in the management of back pain. It is normal and safe to feel some aches and pains when you start to exercise.

However, if you do have pain that is causing you concern speak to your chartered physiotherapist for further advice.

**Michelle Lacey is a Senior Orthopaedic and Musculoskeletal**

#### **Physiotherapist at Beacon Hospital**

*'Try to use a headset instead of holding a phone to your ear and finally stand and walk around when you can'*

*'Increasing your overall activity levels can help keep at bay work-related upper limb and spine disorders'*



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Spend as much time as you can working in a neutral posture — a comfortable body position where no body part is awkwardly bent or twisted

