

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2023 Edition

Perspective

Ergonomics for Everyone

The right to a safe workspace



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Working from home can really be great. What about your health while working at home? Have you noticed that your back and shoulders ache after being hunched over your computer all day? What is with that pain in your wrist? Has your eyesight has gotten worse recently?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then you are probably not working in a correct ergonomic fashion. This means your work environment may not be designed to fit your body's needs. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety defines ergonomics as the science of "fitting the job to the worker". They say that includes designing workspaces, processes, equipment and tools to fit the employee.

This works in a regular office space, but what about your home office or kitchen? The law in Canada says that you still have a right to an ergonomically safe working space, even at home. Also, employers have a responsibility to ensure that the remote office setup of their employees is safe. Why are ergonomics important? A well-designed workspace can reduce the risk of injury, including musculoskeletal injuries. Working safely when it comes to ergonomics can also reduce muscle strain and aches that can be minor now but become serious problems later.

Even if you have been doing it for a few years, it's never too late to make your workspace safer. Your body will thank you for it. What should you keep in mind while setting up a home office? Look at your 'desk' and chair, your computer equipment and how it's set up, and also how you are actually sitting while you work. You might consider getting some new equipment, but you can also make improvements to what you use now to make it more suitable.

Desk

Your home office desktop may be your kitchen table. That's fine, as long as it is not too high. Your table should also be strong enough to bear the weight of any equipment placed on it. Your 'desk' should allow you to fit your knees, feet and thighs comfortably below it. If any body part is pressed tightly up against the table, it will likely cause you harm. You may need to consider using another space or buying an actual desk that meets your body's needs.

When seated, your keyboard and mouse should be at elbow height. Test this by sitting at your table and holding your arms naturally at your sides. Then bend your elbows and hold out your arms as if you were typing. Does that feel right? If not, you will have to make some adjustments. If it's too low, use some books or a wooden box to raise your work surface. If it's too high and you are reaching, use a cushion to sit on.

Chair

The best chairs are the adjustable office chairs, but if you don't have one, work with what you have. Whatever type of chair you use, it should support your spine's natural S-shape. The kitchen chair you've used doesn't do that which is probably why your back hurts. Sitting the right way will help to correct some of this, but you may still need to put a rolled-up towel or pillow in the small of your back to get the shape and support you need.

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When you are sitting at your desk, your feet should be flat on the floor. Sit up as straight as you can and don't tilt from side to side. If you need more height, you should consider wearing flat shoes or using a footrest, a step stool or even a few large books to put your feet on.

Computer Setup

Your keyboard and mouse (if you use one) should be at the same height so that you are not reaching forward. Don't grip the mouse but glide it gently and keep your wrist straight while using it. This helps reduce the risk of repetitive strain injuries. You may already have done this, but reduce or eliminate any glare to avoid eye strain and fatigue. You can also get an anti-glare screen for your monitor.

Here's a test to see if your screen is at the right level. The top line of text on your screen should be at eye level. If it isn't, adjust your monitor. If you are using a laptop or non-movable screen, you can stack books underneath to achieve the desired height. This next tip is crucial no matter where you work. Follow the 20/20/20 rule. Take a 20-second break every 20 minutes and then look about 20 feet away. This will also reduce the stress and strain on your eyes.

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