ERGONOMICS ON THE GO

Working remotely

On the premises of the university, employees have workstations with adjustable chairs, adjustable platforms for the keyboard and mouse and adjustable monitors. However, it is not always the case when employees are working remotely and teleworking. This document will provide tips on how to make you as comfortable and “ergonomic” as possible when outside of the office.

What does “ergonomics” mean?

An ergonomic workstation means that it can be adjusted to the needs and stature of the worker. The equipment, environment and the procedures should allow the worker to:

• Maintain good positions of the joints (referred to as “neutral postures”), which reduce muscles work and strains;
• Reduce or eliminate the static contractions by having good support or changing position regularly.

You can refer to the Office Ergonomic Checklist for further details on a proper ergonomic set-up for computer work.

How to ensure good work postures when working remotely?

On campus, you would normally start by adjusting the chair, then move up and adjust the other components, such as the keyboard and mouse and the monitors. However, this may not be possible when working remotely. Employees often use laptop computers and may not have fully adjustable office chairs, as well as adjustable platforms for the keyboard and mouse.

So, when adjusting the workstation for remote work, it is best to start with the keyboard and mouse first and then adjust the monitors and the chair or seated position accordingly.

First step:

• Align the keyboard and mouse with your elbow height to have neutral postures of the shoulders, arms and wrists.
• If the keyboard and mouse are on the desk, then this may mean raising your chair, or sitting on a pillow to properly align the arms for the keyboard and mouse. If your feet are no longer touching the floor, you will need to use a footrest, box, stool etc. to keep a good contact with the floor and properly support the feet and legs.

Next:

Place the monitor in order to align the eyes just below the tool bars at the top of the screens (eyes within the top 3-5 cm of the screen). This will keep the neck and eye in a good position. This may mean raising your monitor on books, boxes, etc. Be creative, use what is readily available around the house.
Other things to consider:

- Support your back against the backrest of the chair. If the seat pan is too deep, then use a pillow between your back and the backrest to keep a good support without pinching at the back of the knees.
- If the chair has no armrests or if they do not adjust properly, you can support your forearms on the desk instead. Make sure you get yourself close to the desk so you do not end up leaning forward.

**Laptop use**

Laptop computers are not designed to be used for prolonged periods of time. The monitor and keyboard attached together, combined with the smaller screen dimension create awkward postures of the neck, back and arms. Unfortunately, laptops are commonly used for remote work.

For prolonged use, it is suggested to use external peripherals connected to your laptop to favor better work postures. A docking station or switchbox can be used to connect the laptop to an external and larger monitor that can be aligned with eye level, as well as a keyboard and mouse that can be placed at elbow height.

At the very least, you can still use the laptop monitor but connect a regular mouse and keyboard to it. The laptop can be raised on boxes or books to bring it close to eye level. As laptop monitors are smaller, the top of the screen does not need to be aligned with eyes but the top of the screen can be slightly below the eyes. Be wary as the smaller screen size may encourage bent forward positions to see the smaller characters. Enlarge the characters if possible and take regular breaks to look away from the screen and rest the eyes.

Another option is to connect the laptop to a regular screen and use the laptop keyboard and touchpad, placed in front of the monitor. This works best for taller users who can raise the monitor above the laptop.
Move and change position regularly

Despite our best intentions and a proper review our computer set-up, it may be difficult to avoid awkward postures when working remotely. If you cannot avoid the strains and loads, then you can reduce the exposure by taking more frequent breaks to get up, move and stretch.

Ideally, every computer user should get up and move at least every hour. When working remotely with a less ideal installation, it may be advisable to get up, move and stretch every 20 to 30 minutes. With small laptop screens, take your eyes off the screen regularly and look further away to change focal point and relax your eyes.

Employees can take advantage of their home environment to move around or change position. For example, you can stand at a high counter (breakfast bar) with your laptop for 10-15 minutes and reply a few emails or read a document, then go back to sitting at your office space with the keyboard and mouse connected to your laptop. Your standing position may not be ideal but would be acceptable for a 15 minutes period. You can get up from sitting and take a 5 minutes break to unload the dishwasher, or take a quick 15 minutes break to take the dog for a walk. Take opportunities to stand and move as much as possible. For example, use a headset and stand/walk around when listing in to TEAMS meetings. If you don’t need to be looking at documents on the screen, stand or walk around when on the phone.

Example of exercises you can do at your workstation.