

WORKING FROM HOME DURING A PANDEMIC

This bulletin gives examples of occupational health and safety (OHS) best practices employers and workers can follow if working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Go to alberta.ca/covid19 for the most up-to-date information on restrictions to contain COVID-19.

Key information

- Make sure you have clear communication processes and expectations in place.
- Address health issues as well as immediate safety needs.

Overview

During an emergency such as COVID-19, public health directives can change our work landscape quickly and dramatically. If your workplace is supporting social distancing by requiring or permitting new telecommuting/work from home options, these best practices can help maintain worker health and safety.

Working at home policy

Develop a working from home policy that includes:

- Communication between employer and worker.
- Availability of tools and technology to enable staff to work remotely.
- Protocols to protect workers' health and safety.
- Contact with customers, if applicable (for instance, practices that limit direct contact).

Contacts

Employers should establish a contact schedule and have a worker's contact information, including the exact address they will be working at and an alternate phone number. As well, workers should provide:

- An emergency contact.
- A working alone contact (someone the worker connects with regularly, such as a supervisor or a co-worker).

Workers should have their employer's contact information and know how and when to reach out to their supervisor or management. This is especially important in circumstances where the worker might typically seek out an in-person conversation.

Mental health

Working from home can be a big change under any circumstances. Use strategies such as these to help maintain well-being and balance.

- Keep a schedule. It is easy to overwork when working from home. Set break times, regular working hours, and beginning and end of work day routines.
- Set up a dedicated work space and ground rules.
 - A home office is ideal, but if a separate room isn't available, create a work area and make sure that family or roommates know that when you're in that area, you're working.
 - Consider using tools such as closed doors, a white noise machine or app, or a taped up "Do not disturb" sign to reduce distractions and reinforce your work space and requirements.
- Stay connected. We're social beings and workplaces are an important part of both our personal health and community.
 - Employers should continue to hold meetings (for instance by tele or video conference) and set deadlines that support focus and structure.
 - Workers can actively maintain their office culture through direct messaging, quick phone calls or if work schedules allow, virtual coffee breaks together.
 - If needed, everyone should know how to access employer or community supports, such as an employer and family assistance program or the [Canadian Mental Health Association](https://www.cmh.ca/).
- Maintain your professional identity. Dress and groom for your work day, keep colleagues informed of project progress proactively, and promptly return emails, calls and voice mails.
- Take advantage of being at home to use your scheduled break times to support your health and well-being in ways that aren't ordinarily possible. Step out to your balcony or yard, eat a healthy snack or lunch from your kitchen, check-in with your family or roommates.
- Stay informed and follow direction about the pandemic - for instance, on hand hygiene and social distancing - but make sure you don't overload on media. Get information from reputable sources such as:
 - Alberta's [COVID-19 web page](https://www.alberta.ca/covid-19-web-page)
 - the [Public Health Agency of Canada](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/)
 - the [World Health Organization](https://www.who.int/)

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Ergonomics

A poorly designed home office or workstation can increase the risk of developing or aggravating musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs). Some common hazards that can lead to MSIs such as muscle strain, pain and numbness include:

- **Awkward Posture.** Any poor computer or workstation set up can cause awkward postures. The design of laptops make it impossible to position both the screen and keyboard at the correct height, which can lead to poor postures in the neck, shoulders and wrists.
- **Contact Stress** Contact stress is when a hard surface (such as the edge of a desk or the edge of a laptop) places external pressure on the soft tissues of the body. Poor workstation set up and the use of a laptop can increase contact stress on the wrists and forearms.
- **Repetition.** Typing and using the mouse requires repetitive actions in the arms, hands, and fingers. If a body part is in an awkward posture, and you are performing a repetitive activity, the risk for developing an MSI increases.
- **Static Posture.** When working from home, there is the potential for staying at your computer for longer periods of time and not taking regular movement breaks. A lack of movement can increase your risk for developing an MSI.

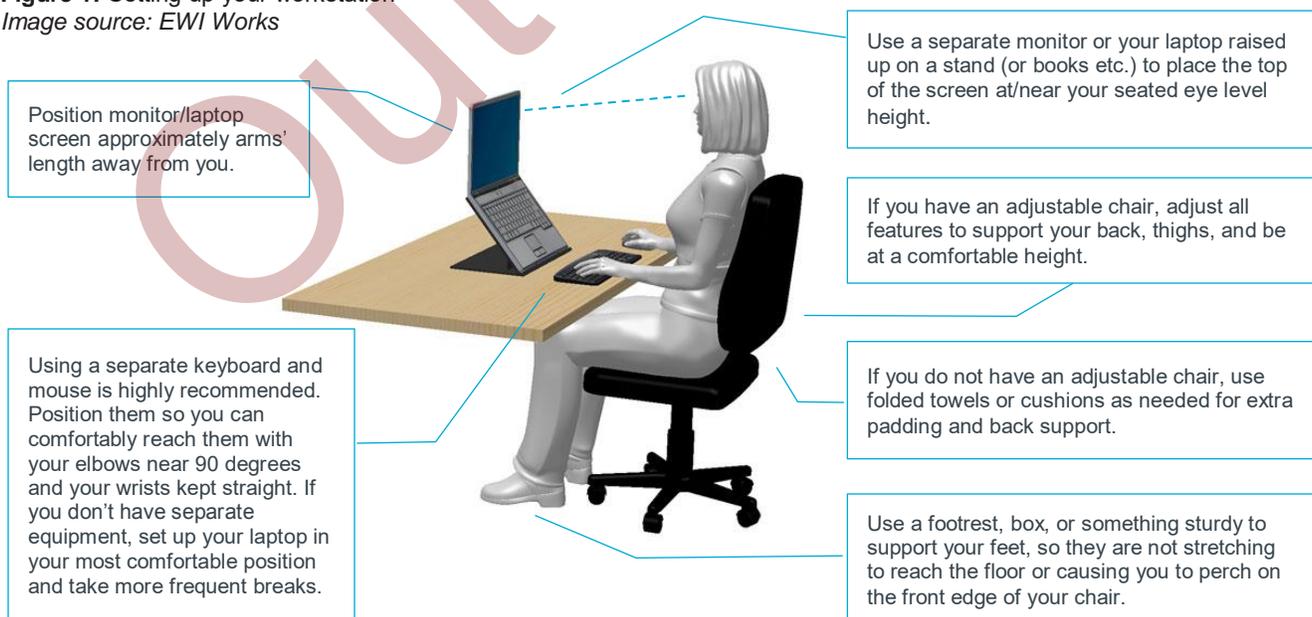
Tips for setting up your home office

Figure 1 (below) gives some guidelines you can follow to set up your workstation. Below are some additional tips to consider when setting up your home office.

- Have adequate work surface space. A desk with a height-adjustable chair is best but you can also manage at a kitchen table or a similar space.
- Avoid working from couches or other soft surfaces that do not have a stable work surface and lack support for your back.
- When possible, position your computer so windows are beside you, and not in front or behind you. Use options such as blinds or curtains to control glare and reduce risk for eyestrain.
- Make sure to follow good housekeeping practices – clean and clutter free surfaces, electrical cords in good condition and are properly positioned, safe storage of heavy or sharp items – in order to reduce the risk of common household and office injuries and illnesses.

As well as your scheduled breaks, get up and move around periodically. If you need to, set a timer to remind yourself to take quick, active breaks that let you reposition your body and refocus mentally. Frequent micro (very short) breaks throughout the day are important for both physical and mental health.

Figure 1: Setting up your workstation
Image source: EWI Works



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Contact us

OHS Contact Centre

(Complaints, questions, reporting serious incidents)

Anywhere in Alberta

- 1-866-415-8690

Edmonton & surrounding area

- 780-415-8690

Deaf or hearing impaired

- 1-800-232-7215 (Alberta)
- 780-427-9999 (Edmonton)

Online reporting service

(PSIs, mine or mine site incidents)

oirportal.labour.alberta.ca/pre-screening/

Website

alberta.ca/OHS

Get copies of the OHS Act, Regulation and Code

Alberta Queen's Printer

qp.gov.ab.ca

Occupational Health and Safety

alberta.ca/ohs-act-regulation-code.aspx

For more information

Musculoskeletal injuries, biomechanical risk factors (ERG019)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/erg019

Musculoskeletal injuries, symptoms and types of injuries (ERG018)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/erg018

Office health and safety CCOHS fact sheet

ccohs.ca/oshanswers/occup_workplace/office_general.html

Proper Height of Work Surfaces (ERG016)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/erg016

Sitting and Preventing Back Pain (ERG014)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/erg014

Ergonomics: Setting Up Your Work Area web page

myhealth.alberta.ca/Health/pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=abp8920&lang=en-ca

That Hurts! Contact Stress at Work (ERG032)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/erg032

Telework/telecommuting CCOHS fact sheet

ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/telework.html

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PUB ID COVID19-02