



Healthy
Workplaces
LIGHTEN THE LOAD



Preventing musculoskeletal disorders when teleworking

Key points

- The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially boosted the already upwards trend in home-based teleworking.
- Although home-based teleworking has potential advantages, it may negatively affect workers' health and contribute to the development or exacerbation of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).
- It is crucial to identify and address MSD risk factors related to telework.
- A risk assessment of the home workplace is the first step.
- It is important to adopt a multidisciplinary approach in tackling MSD risks related to telework.
- Optimise workplace ergonomics and environment, move, change posture, take regular breaks, and stay connected with colleagues and supervisors.
- Providing education and training creates awareness and helps teleworkers to make optimal use of dynamic workstations and stay active throughout the working day.
- A clear telework policy setting out provisions on ergonomic equipment, healthy (dis)connecting, who assesses the risks, etc., is key.

Healthy Workplaces Lighten the Load

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) is running a Europe-wide campaign from 2020 to 2022 to raise awareness of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and the importance of preventing them. The objective is to encourage employers, workers and other stakeholders to work together to prevent MSDs and to promote good musculoskeletal health among EU workers.

Home-based telework is on the rise!

Teleworking rocketed in 2020, when an important share of EU employers teleworked full time at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This substantially boosted the already upwards trend in teleworking in recent years.

Impact of telework on workers' health

Although home-based teleworking has potential advantages, such as the time and stress saved by not commuting, a better work-life balance, higher productivity and better concentration, it is also associated with an increase in prolonged sitting and time pressure, longer working hours and social isolation. This may have a negative impact on teleworkers' health and contribute to the development or exacerbation of MSDs.

As MSDs are multidimensional in origin and related to ergonomic, work organisation, environmental and psychosocial factors, it is crucial to identify teleworkers' MSDs risks in the home and address them preventively and proactively.

Workplace risk assessment is the first step

Telework must be included in the employer's mandatory risk assessment. Workers' and management's participation in the risk assessment process is important. Apart from providing information key to taking the next steps towards an action plan to prevent risks, it creates awareness among teleworkers and management. Interactive body mapping and hazard mapping methods¹, combined with online tools or checklists, are a good way to identify and understand teleworkers' home-based workplace and related MSD risks.



Optimise workstation ergonomics and environment

Teleworkers do not always have the same resources at home as they do in the office. Follow these tips² to make the home office a comfortable and healthy workplace:

- Office chair:
 - Adjust the seat height so that the hips are slightly higher than the knees and the thighs slope slightly downwards. Use a cushion if the seat is too low and the chair is not adjustable.
 - Ensure that the feet are in contact with the floor.
- Office desk:
 - Make sure that the desk is large enough (i.e. 120 cm by 80 cm).
 - Adjust the height to elbow height. If the desk height is not adjustable, raise the height of the chair (e.g. with cushions) if the desk is too high, or raise the desk height (e.g. using blocks) if the desk is too low.
- Screen:
 - Position the screen at eye level (or just below) and at arm's length from the eyes.
 - Use a laptop stand, or a box or a stack of books, to position the screen at the optimum height.
 - Follow the 20-20-20 rule (i.e. every 20 minutes focus on an object at least 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds) to avoid eye fatigue.
- Mouse and keyboard:
 - Use an external mouse and keyboard.
 - Position the keyboard in front of the screen and 5-10 cm from the edge of the desk.
 - Place the mouse as close as possible to the keyboard.
- Use a document stand, placed between the screen and the keyboard, when typing from paper documents.
- Lighting:
 - Provide adequate lighting (daylight or artificial light).
 - Avoid extreme contrast and prevent glare from sunlight or bright lighting on the screen.
- Air and temperature:
 - The optimum room temperature is between 22 °C and 24.5 °C.
 - Open windows and doors regularly, e.g. before starting work or when taking a break.
- Background noise:
 - Work in a separate room and make clear arrangements with housemates.
 - A noise-reducing headset may be useful.

¹ <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/body-and-hazard-mapping-prevention-musculoskeletal-disorders-msds>

² The tips are good practice examples mainly intended for teleworkers. They are not mandatory or relevant to all teleworkers. Their relevance will depend on the specific teleworker/home-based telework environment/company and the outcomes of risk assessments.

Keep moving!

Combine these three pieces of advice: (1) sit fewer hours a day; (2) change posture often; and (3) adopt a good sitting posture. Physical activity and exercise outside working hours is equally important. Move more during the working day as follows:

- Start the day with a short walk or a quick workout.
- Regularly stand up during online meetings or walk during phone calls.
- Avoid long periods of sitting – aim to get up every 20-30 minutes and *always* get up after 2 hours of sitting for at least 10 minutes (short, frequent microbreaks are better than longer breaks taken occasionally).
- Alternate sitting and standing. Use a sit-stand desk. If not available, put the laptop on a platform on the desk or on a cabinet.
- Lunch break is the ideal time for a walk, 15 minutes of exercise, garden work or other outdoor activity.
- Move while sitting, e.g. by activating the dynamic seat of the office chair or stretching and leaning back.
- Regularly do these quick exercises to improve blood circulation and release muscle tension:
 - Turn your head to the left and right.
 - Tilt your head forwards and gently shake it from side to side.
 - Let your arms and shoulders hang loosely, then lean your shoulders towards your feet.
 - Roll your shoulders backwards and then forwards.
 - Extend your arms forwards at shoulder height. Put your hands together (palms facing outward) and stretch your arms.
 - Spread out your arms sideways and backwards.
 - Plant your heels on the floor and raise your toes.
 - Plant your toes on the floor and raise your heels.

Improve work-life balance

When working from home, the boundaries between work and home life become increasingly blurred. Follow these eight tips for a better work-life balance:

1. Provide a separate home office where you can work undisturbed. This maintains a clear separation between work and home.
2. Schedule the workday (including lunch and short breaks). Start each day by setting goals and track your progress. If necessary, adjust goals according to current circumstances and work rhythm.
3. Respect 'normal' office working hours.
4. Maintain a good routine: get up, dress and start work at the same time as you would on a 'normal' workday. End the workday, for example, by taking a walk.
5. Make plans for after-work hours. This makes it more likely that you will log off and stop work.
6. Set up an out-of-office reply and voicemail during holidays.

7. Take enough breaks during the day to break up periods of intense work, and do not skip lunch break. Go offline!
8. Inform colleagues that you're 'not available' to avoid getting distracted when you need to concentrate.

Stay healthy and connected

- Schedule regular phone calls or virtual meetings with colleagues and supervisors. This helps to keep them informed of what you are working on and maintain positive relationships. Tell them when you would like them to help you. Otherwise, express your appreciation and in turn help them when necessary.
- Make time for informal chat. Reserve the first part of meetings for a check-in to discuss how everyone is doing and talk about non-work-related issues. Take virtual coffee breaks.

What can employers do?

- *Have a clear telework policy*
This should include provisions on how to assess and manage occupational risks, ergonomic equipment, hours of availability and expected results.
- *Provide training and education*
Technical assistance and training help teleworkers to make optimal use of dynamic workstations and stay active throughout the workday. It also raises awareness among teleworkers and supervisors of MSD risk factors related to telework and how to deal with them.
- *Support teleworkers in preventing MSDs*
 - Provide ergonomic laptops, external mice and keyboards.
 - Provide technical support and guidance on how to set up a home workstation.
 - Promote regular exercise by encouraging employees to take part in active breaks and short workouts during online meetings.
 - Stay connected with colleagues. Team meetings are best alternated with one-to-one talks.
 - Provide teleworking buddies to allow employees to share their concerns, which will detect potential difficulties more quickly.
 - Talk to employees about healthy disconnection. What are their needs? What do they expect? What do you expect? Say too what you do not expect.



Napo film clips and resources for workplace discussions

Teleworking to stop the pandemic:

<https://www.napofilm.net/en/napos-films/napo-teleworking-stop-pandemic>

Adjust your home office:

<https://www.napofilm.net/en/napos-films/napo-back-healthy-future/positive-position>

Workplace example 1

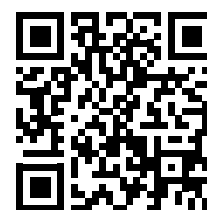
A social security company has allowed its employees to take their office chairs home during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also gave them the opportunity to buy a home office chair at a reasonable price through group purchasing. Every teleworker was provided with an external mouse, keyboard and laptop stand. Teleworkers and their supervisors also received online training on how to reduce sitting time, optimise workplace ergonomics, disconnect and eat healthily when working from home.

Workplace example 2

A software company has taken measures to help its employees 'truly' disconnect from work. Emails are blocked during holidays. Out-of-office messages indicate that emails will be automatically deleted and should be sent to another address (if urgent) or resent at a later date (if a response is required). Phone calls and virtual meetings are prohibited between 08.00 and 10.00 in order to improve focus and concentration.

Resources

- Risk assessment and telework - checklist:
https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Risk_assessment_and_telework_-_checklist
- EU-OSHA's thematic section on preventing and managing MSDs:
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/musculoskeletal-disorders>
- Musculoskeletal disorders and telework:
https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Musculoskeletal_disorders_and_telework
- Practical tips to make home-based telework as healthy, safe and effective as possible:
https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Practical_tips_to_make_home-based_telework_as_healthy_safe_and_effective_as_possible#Home-based_telework_and_safety_and_health_at_work
- Musculoskeletal disorders and prolonged static sitting:
https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Musculoskeletal_disorders_and_prolonged_static_sitting
- Strategies to tackle musculoskeletal disorders at work: training:
https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Strategies_to_tackle_musculoskeletal_disorders_at_work_training
- Promoting moving and exercise at work to avoid prolonged standing and sitting:
https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Promoting_moving_and_exercise_at_work_to_avoid_prolonged_standing_and_sitting
- Recommendations and interventions to decrease physical inactivity at work:
https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Recommendations_and_interventions_to_decrease_physical_inactivity_at_work
- Managing the interface between family and working life:
https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Work-life_balance_%E2%80%93_Managing_the_interface_between_family_and_working_life



www.healthy-workplaces.eu