ErgoLife

with

Ellen Buckstein

# The Ergonomics Of Working From Home

If you began working from home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic and are interested in knowing what your ergonomic risk is, you can start by checking in with your body. If your body is fatigued, strained, hurting or even frozen in areas that felt fine when you were working at the office, chances are your home workspace ergonomics need to be improved.

Was your home workspace set up for more than occasional use?

The **dining room table**, or kitchen table, or sofa or bed workstation is a challenge to both your body and your productivity. If you began working from home during the pandemic, you might not have realized when you set up your workspace that it would be for more than a few weeks.

But the short term has a way of becoming the long term and in many cases it's going to be you who wants to keep it that way. If your home office was set up before you realized that you would be working from home for months or years or maybe forever, now is the time to upgrade it. Bad ergonomics is not okay and will affect productivity if it hasn't already done so.

I hope you will find the articles in this eBook helpful in assessing your own working environment. These posts, originally published on my website, ergolife.co.il, will provide you with concrete steps to start mitigating your risk of injury and increasing your productivity while working from home. Increased body awareness is the key to making your workplace more productive, pleasant and safe.

Ellen Buckstein

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# Ergonomic Risks of Working from Home

Is your desk too high or too low relative to your chair? Is your chair height adjustable? If not, you are at risk of experiencing wrist or shoulder pain. Does your chair lack a cushioned seat that distributes the weight along your thighs and across your pelvis? Do the armrests of your chair collide with the desk preventing your from getting as close as you need to your monitor without leaning forward? These are just a few of the many, many causes of musculoskeletal pain and injury.

If previously you worked in an office and had a customized or adjustable workstation including a height adjustable desk, ergonomic chair, monitor arm or riser and you are now working at the dining room table or worse, then your ergonomic risk has gone up substantially.

You need to identify the ergonomic risks of your home workspace and make changes to ensure that it is no less productive, pleasant and safe than what you left behind at the office.

## Poor Ergonomics Affects Productivity and Profitability

Studies have shown that both employers and employees believe that WFH has a positive effect on productivity so far. Many employees will choose to keep working from home full time. In other cases, employers are sufficiently satisfied with productivity to keep employees at home. Your home office must be comfortable and safe so that your productivity will not be adversely affected. If physical discomfort or fatigue is affecting the way you feel about your work, your will be less productive and less profitable.

## Employers' Response

Many employers have responded to the ergonomic challenges presented by WFH. As they should. Caring for employee wellness is one way that employers engage remote workers. In some countries an ergonomic assessment is regulated for employees working from home. MNC's usually require the same standards in all locations. In the current climate, employers have by necessity replaced the on site ergonomic assessment with an online assessment.

Many companies are providing a budget for upgrading the home office, or specifically for purchasing a chair. Employers are turning to me for recommendations for furniture and equipment suppliers. While I wholeheartedly agree that a dining room or kitchen chair can never be good for prolonged computer work, rushing out to buy a chair should not be done before identifying an individual's ergonomic risks. Furniture and equipment are easy to buy and they should come after identifying an individual's complaints and risks. There is more to reducing your ergonomic risk than buying a new chair.

## Take Matters into Your Own Hands

A diagnosis should always come before a solution. After identifying ergonomic risks with professional ergonomics advice, it should be up to the employee to decide how best to use the allotted budget.

# The Dining Room Table was a Temporary Solution. Why Are You Still Working There?

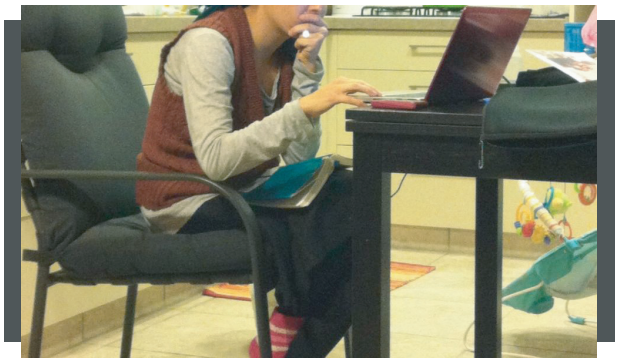
Although working from the dining room table sounds like it would be better than working from the sofa, there are too many inherent risk factors for it to work well as a desk.

**1. Height.** Dining room tables are higher than office desks and their height is not adjustable. The standard range for desk heights is 72-75 cm. Even a desk at the low end of this range is too high for many people and unless they raise their chair and add the necessary foot support, the result is tension in the upper back and shoulders. Dining room tables are usually 77 or 78 cm high, putting them outside the maximum height range for a desk for even a very tall person.

***Your dining room table was never intended to be your primary workspace.***

**2. Leg Room.** Recommended features for a desk include adequate room for your legs. The table legs on your dining room table might determine where and how you sit and might not allow you to centre yourself at your laptop or place your feet on the floor below your knees.

**3. Multi Purpose.** Whether you live alone or share your home with other people, the dining room table is intended for purposes other than work and this limits your options for arranging your desktop. For example, it is not appropriate and maybe not even possible to put a sit-stand solution or a hinged monitor arm on your dining room table. It is best to have a dedicated surface for your home office, just like you had at work.



**4. Disincentive to use an office chair.** Are you really going to want an office chair at your dining room table? Do you have room in your dining area to be switching chairs all the time? The temptation to just use a dining room chair is going to be very great.

**5. Lighting.** Your dining area lighting was chosen for atmosphere and mood. Workspace lighting should be a lot brighter than mood lighting to prevent eye strain and posture deterioration as you struggle to see your screen. Also, try and remember that a window, if there is one, should be at your side. Light behind you causes glare on your screen and light in front of you causes glare on your eyes.

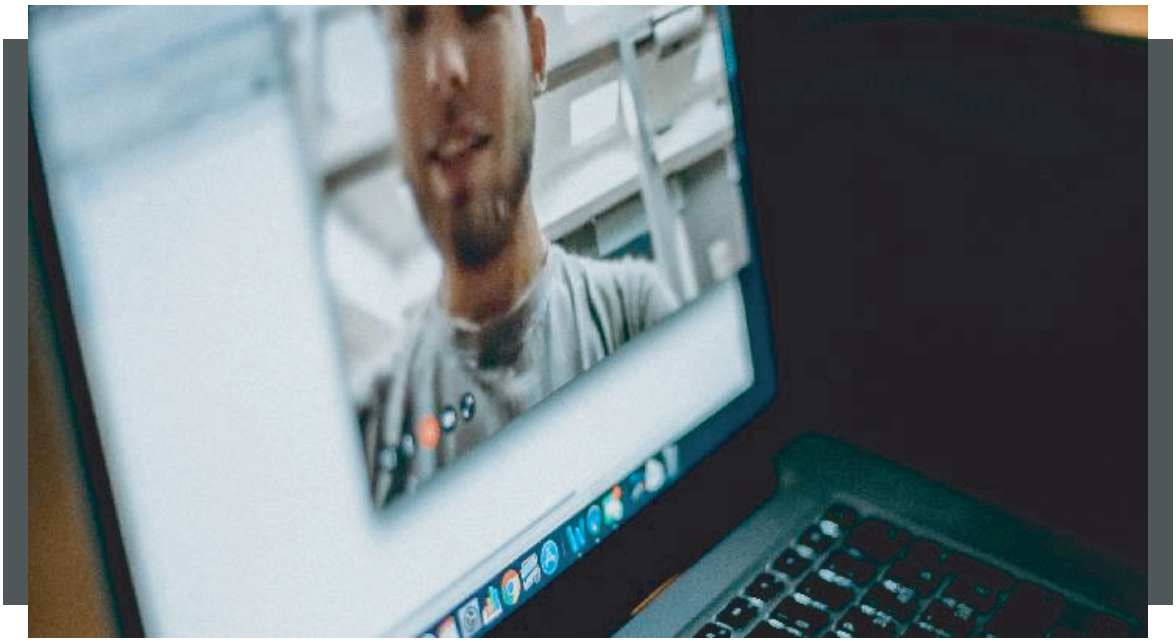
**6. Productivity.** You can't share a workspace that should be intended to maximize your productivity. How productive are you going to be if you have to clear your work every time the family wants to sit down to dinner? Your workspace should be set up with your metrics and needs in mind. Having a dedicated work space is key to improving productivity when working from home.

## In Conclusion

Your dining room table was never intended to be your primary workspace. Whereas it might have sufficed for a few weeks, if you are planning to continue working long hours from home, your workplace must meet the unique demands of your body and the nature of your work.

You may not be ready to make changes to your home workplace, but you can begin right now by paying attention to your body. Remember, you are the center of the story. Your workplace must be designed to meet your needs. Otherwise, you will rearrange your body to meet your workplace. Never good.

# Remote Ergonomic Assessments – Do They Work?



What is a person supposed to do? On the one hand, you left your good furniture and equipment behind at work and are in pain from working long hours at your makeshift home office. On the other hand, pandemic restrictions might not allow you or your employer to call for an ergonomist to come into your house to do a risk assessment.

Enter the remote assessment.

Ergonomics risk assessments, whether onsite or remote, combine listening to the client with observing him or her with a professional eye.

## Attention to Detail and Connecting the Dots

You have identified that your workplace design is probably causing your pain. But you don't know what it is about the workplace, exactly. You might be missing out small but important details. You may forget to mention that the drawers under your desk at home are preventing you from getting in close enough to type and see the screen without leaning forward. And yet, this is the probable cause of your recent back pain.

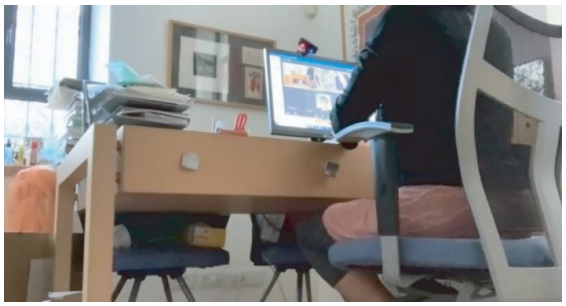
**Combining the client's story with what I observe and reviewing the photos paints a complete picture.**

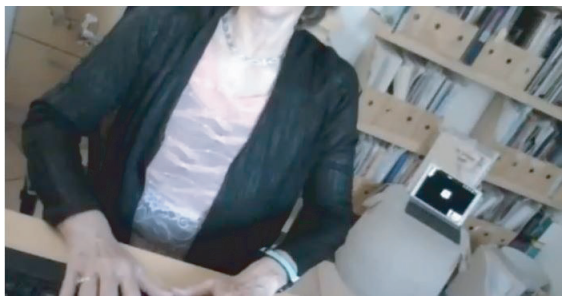
An ergonomic consultant's role is to connect the dots. "My desk at work was height adjustable" combined with "Ever since I moved apartments I'm using my father's old desk" explains a lot. "My desk is two meters long" is cancelled out by "I am only using one corner of it **because the cables are too short".**

Because getting the big picture is so important, it is often unclear to me what is causing somebody's pain when they describe their situation to me over the phone until I see it with my own eyes.

## How is a Remote Assessment Different from an In Person Assessment?

Below, you can see some screenshots from a recent consultation I conducted over zoom. The client made sure to position her camera at different angles so I could get a complete picture of her surroundings.





While it is never possible to get all the information needed for an ergonomic risk assessment on a phone call, it is very much possible to get good results on a video call with the client capturing different camera angles. Combining the client's story with what I observe and reviewing the photos paints a complete picture. It doesn't matter if the photos were taken in person or captured remotely.

## Remote Ergonomic Assessments are Effective

Just like with in person assessments, remote assessments identify current complaints, ergonomic risks and mitigating factors. They also include recommendations for change. They are a little bit more participatory as the client is helping with the camerawork, but by listening and observing it is possible to identify the same ergonomic risks remotely as in person.

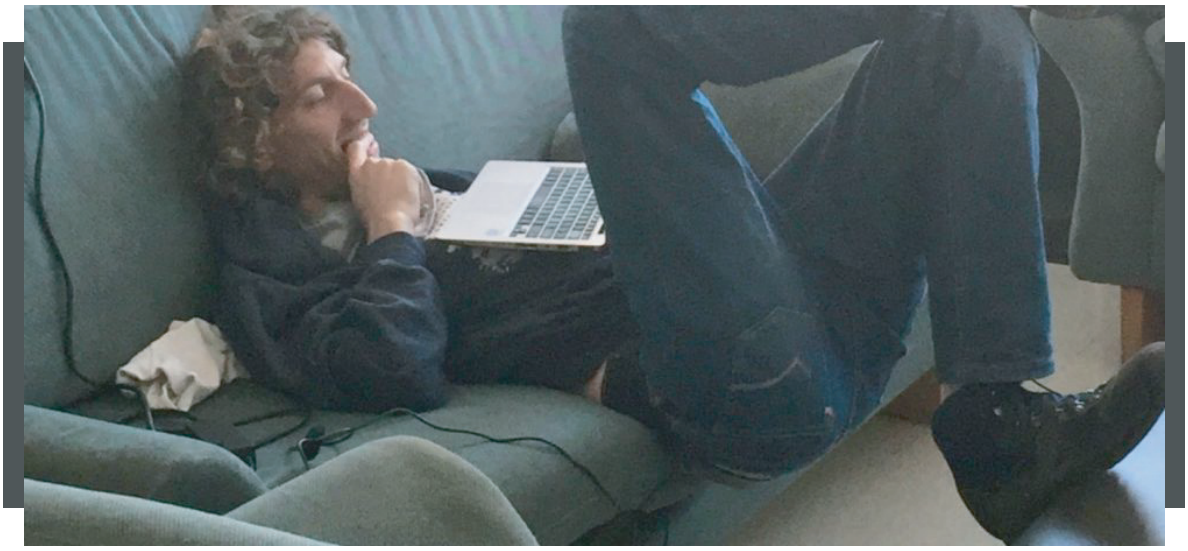
# Mitigating Risks When Working from the Sofa

A while back I was on phone with tech support from a digital invoicing company. When I heard kids in the background I asked if he was working at the kitchen table and he responded that no, he was working from the sofa. I inquired whether he enjoyed working from home and he said he loved it, hopes never to go back to the office. Unfortunately, ergonomic injuries are cumulative and I'm not sure the final tally is in.

Working from the sofa is never ideal. In the photo above, my son in law is demonstrating a position common to very tall people. He is adapting his posture to get more support from the couch. Although the pressure on his neck is extreme, so is the pressure that most laptop users experience from slumping forward when their laptop screen is too low.

Because ergonomic injury is cumulative, you can get away with slumping at a laptop for very brief periods when you are on the road or on your sofa without causing musculoskeletal damage. Remember, the laptop was intended for portability, as an occasional solution.

But if you are using your laptop as your main or only computer it is essential to **sit a desk most of the time**, put your laptop on a riser, and use an external keyboard and mouse. And if you are buying a laptop for home use rather than use on the road and weight is not a factor, buy the biggest screen possible.



Working from the sofa is fun, and it works well with staying in pajamas all day. But if you plan on working from home long term (or as that customer service rep hoped, forever) you will need to start thinking about **more healthy and viable solutions.**

For occasional work on the sofa, the best thing to do is **raise the top of the screen up to your eye level** by placing your laptop on small height adjustable table or the arm of your couch if it is wide enough. This will allow you to work with arms and wrists supported and a raised screen. The lap "desk" in the photo above is a good start but it's not enough.

***Remember, the laptop was intended for portability, as an occasional solution.***

At least this prop supports the user's wrists in the neutral position. But if your screen is not raised high enough you will end up slumping forward to bring your eye level down to the top of the screen. We should always **adjust the work environment to our bodies** and not our bodies to the work environment.

Without a solution to **raise your screen** and support your forearms and wrists you shouldn't work like this for too long. Mixing up different seating solutions during the day is good and working from the sofa is fun.

So is staying in your pajamas. But ultimately good habits must rule the day.

# Increasing Your Body Awareness Just Became A Lot More Important. Here are 3 Reasons Why.

Working from home may have changed more than just your workplace setup; it may have drastically changed the way you do your job.

When I did onsite ergonomic consultations prior to the new regimen, I used to move around all day. I'd walk from workstation to workstation. I'd be kneeling, crouching, climbing stairs, writing notes. Often, my work would include demonstrating stretches.

Now, just like you, I sit at my computer all day working. Part of that is performing ergonomic assessments remotely.

## 1 More Time Spent at your Desk

If we are spending all our of working hours at our computers instead of moving around, our computer setup at home might be even important than it was at the office.

Maybe when you were moving around more, it was possible to have horrible workplace ergonomics and not experience any pain.

I have assessed workstations where clients report no pain at all despite a high presence of ergonomic risk factors. Usually the explanation is that they barely sit at their desks.

For an office manager clocking 6,000 steps per day at the office with no extended sedentary behavior, poor workstation ergonomics didn't matter so much. Same for a busy supervisor who spent most of her time managing by walking around.

Ergonomic injury is cumulative. It takes long hours, and sometimes months or years for those overstrained muscles and tendons to make it impossible for you to work, but when they do you will wish you had listened to your body sooner.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, instead of moving around all day many of us are slouched hour after hour at our computers. If now is the first time you are sitting at your desk instead of walking around an office, then good ergonomics just became a lot more important.

## 2 Downgrade in the Quality of your Furniture and Equipment

Does this sound familiar? If you were working in high tech or for a multi national corporation and have never worked from home before, it is likely that you have experienced a serious downgrade in your furniture and equipment.

Your fully adjustable chair has been replaced by a kitchen stool. Your adjustable-height desk is now a shelf bolted to the wall at a random height. Unfortunately I'm not making this stuff up. I am receiving more calls than ever before and many of them are from individuals who left their ergonomic furniture behind at the office and are unable to continue working from home because of pain.

***Your adjustable- height desk is now a shelf bolted to the wall at a random height.***

Good office furniture and equipment is not just another competitive workplace condition like free lunches and a fully stocked coffee bar. It's about wellness and productivity. Many large corporations are supporting employees working from home with virtual ergonomic assessments or a budget for new furniture and equipment.

Although most employees are using the budget to buy a chair, there is more to good office ergonomics than just a new chair. There is also an increasing trend of people purchasing height-adjustable desks for their homes.

And the results are justifying the initiatives. Studies are finding that productivity is up in the short term. For it to stay that way, the home workstation has to be comfortable, pleasant and safe. I am consulting for several companies on how to assist their employees to find the right ergonomic furniture for their specific work from home situation.

## 3 Now is the time to Make Healthy Lifestyle Changes

Many of us have used this time at home to upgrade our skills and cultivate healthy habits. You can now do that weird yoga pose at your desk without fear of judgement. Working from home allows us additional freedom to adjust our lifestyle for the better. Now is the time to upgrade our body awareness as well.

Whereas assessing postures and ergonomic risks is best left to professionals, paying attention to the early signs of pain and injury is something everybody can do.

**Working from home allows us additional freedom to adjust our lifestyle for the better.**

When it comes to ergonomics, small changes make a big difference. This works in both directions, for better and for worse. Paying attention to how your body feels is a learned skill. If we were doing it, we wouldn't ever get to the situation where our pain is so acute that working from our desks becomes unbearable. We would make changes long before a repetitive strain injury or work related musculoskeletal disorder sidelined us.

If you're sitting for longer periods than before in a workspace that was not designed with ergonomic principles in mind, don't wait for the pain to get worse. Pay more attention to how your body feels, and do something about it.

## Book a Consultation

I can help you assess your Ergonomic Risk and suggest concrete steps to reduce risk of injury and increase your productivity. I work with individuals and companies, in-person and remotely.

**Contact Me**