Ergonomics in the Home Office

Overview

As more employees are working from home, it has become increasingly important to optimize the remote "workstation." Since many of the home areas, such as a couch or kitchen table, are not designed for computer work, and employees working from home often sit at these locations for extended periods, the chance of developing ergonomic-type injuries increases.

This update from Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) is intended to provide guidelines in setting up a workspace at home. It is not intended to be a set of rules, as all home layouts will differ and not all homes have the same facilities for home office workstations. EHS is always available to answer questions regarding the home office workstation setup and to provide recommendations regarding home offices and home office furniture.

Applicability

This update applies to any Weill Cornell Medicine (WCM) employees, students, or volunteers working from a home office workstation or other remote location while performing their job tasks. It does not apply to employees working while on campus or at their regular work site in a building owned or leased by WCM, and it does not apply to anyone conducting job tasks that do not require a computer or a desk.

Tips for Setting up a Home Office Workstation

- **Desk or Working Surface** – The surface holding the computer. This may include, but not be limited to, a desk, a dining table, a coffee table, or a TV tray.
  - Choose a working surface that allows you to sit with a neutral posture.
  - Your knees, feet, and thighs should fit comfortably underneath the working surface.
  - The working surface should be at about elbow height when you are seated. If you need to adjust the height, raise the surface up with boxes or books if the surface is too low, or raise your chair height if it is too high.
  - Rest your feet flat on the floor, on a box, or other footrest.
  - Use task lighting for fine tasks, and position it so it does not shine on reflective surfaces.
  - Keep frequently-used objects close to you.

- **Computer Screen** – This can be a monitor, laptop screen, television or projected screen, or any combination of those.
  - Place the screen in a location where the top is at or slightly below eye level.
  - If the monitor is not adjustable, or if you are using a laptop as your screen, prop it up to the ideal position.
  - Keep the screen at one arm's length from you.
  - Adjust the screen's tilt to reduce glare, and avoid direct light from other sources on the screen.
  - If you use multiple screens, line them up side by side at the same level with your primary screen directly in front of you.

- **Keyboard and Mouse –** This encompasses any devices used for cursor movement or text input.
  - Use a USB keyboard and mouse if working on a laptop.
  - Ensure the mouse is the correct size for your hands; do not utilize a travel mouse for everyday use.
  - Place the keyboard and mouse at elbow height.
  - Keep the keyboard and mouse close to you to avoid reaching for them.
  - Keep your wrists elevated during keyboard and mouse use.
  - Tilt the keyboard flat or tilt the front slightly "down", with the bottom of the keyboard high and the top of the keyboard tilted away from you. This will help keep your wrists elevated.

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- **Chair and Posture –** This includes any seating used for work. Many seats are not optimized for computer work, so adjustments often have to be made.
  - Sit in a chair that allows your feet to rest flat on the floor or footrest, with your thighs parallel to the floor.
  - If your feet can not rest on the floor, use a footrest or a box to rest your feet.
  - Use a chair with a back that has lumbar support. Place a pillow at your lower back if the chair does not have built-in lumbar support.
  - Switch from a sitting to a standing position for at least five minutes every hour.
  - If you are using a sit-stand desk, do not stand all day. Rather, alternate between sitting and standing hourly.
  - Keep all equipment at a location where you are not sitting too close or too far from the keyboard and mouse.
  - Sit or stand up straight, with a neutral spine, while working.

At-Home Office Furniture

As all home office workstations will differ, it is impossible to provide one uniform design for working from home. Therefore, there is no one type of furniture that is required or recommended for working at home. However, EHS is available to help advise employees and recommend office furniture to obtain based on specific budgetary and special considerations that are unique to the employee.

The employee is responsible for purchasing their own home office furniture and supplies. This may differ in certain departments, but as a whole, the university is not responsible for the purchase of at-home office furniture and supplies.

Reporting Work-Related Injuries

All work-related injuries and illnesses should be reported for workers' compensation purposes, as well as for monitoring the effectiveness of safety programs at WCM. However, injuries considered work-related at the home office differ from those considered work-related on campus.

While working from home, the only injuries considered work-related are those that occur ***during work-related activities***. Aa an example, an injury that occurs while lifting supplies as part of your job task is considered work-related. However, a slip and fall on a wet floor while walking from your desk to the kitchen is not considered work-related. Injuries related to computer work (i.e., ergonomic injuries) are considered work-related if that computer work caused or contributed to the condition.

Injuries can be reported to Workforce Health and Safety (WHS) via the WorkSafe portal or by calling WHS at 212-746-4370. Contact Workforce Health and Safety if you receive any bills for any work-related injuries or illnesses.

ADA Reasonable Accommodation Requests

The ADA Reasonable Accommodation Request is a collaborative effort between Cigna, the employee, the Employee Relations Office, and the department to discuss the need for accommodation, as well as identify possible accommodation solutions. This is a method to ensure that an employee with a disability or a legitimate medical need can receive the accommodations they need to continue working productively.

Historically, working from home was considered, in and of itself, a reasonable accommodation. However, with the increasing prevalence of the home office, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, additional accommodations may need to be made. You may qualify for an ADA Reasonable Accommodation Request if you have a documented medical need for an accommodation. The actual accommodations made as a result of this request are decided between the employee, the supervisor, Human Resources, and Cigna. The accommodations may differ among different employees, and specific accommodation requests may be denied or changed, but that is to be decided between all involved parties.

If you have been diagnosed by a physician as requiring additional ergonomic resources for your workstation, you can begin the Reasonable Accommodation Request process by contacting Human Resources. Visit the HR Website for more information.

Responsibilities

Supervisors must:

- Communicate with their employees the importance of proper ergonomics at home.
- Work with the employee and other involved parties to determine the reasonable accommodations to be made as the result of an ADA Reasonable Accommodation Request.

Employees must:

- Set up their home office workstation in an ergonomically sound manner.
- Report all work-related injuries and illnesses that occur during work-related activities at home.
- Obtain, within reason, all necessary office furniture and equipment for work at home.
- Collaborate with the department and other involved parties during any reasonable accommodation requests in which they are involved.

Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) must:

- Provide technical assistance and guidance on ergonomics, as well as equipment-related questions for the home office.
- Investigate work-related injuries and illnesses, including those that occur in the home office.
- Provide ergonomic assessments upon request. These could be virtual ergonomic assessments of an employee's home office workstation.

Workforce Health and Safety (WHS) must:

- Send accident reports to EHS so that they can be investigated in a timely fashion.
- Work with employees to resolve any billing or workers' compensation issues that occur as the result of work-related injuries.

References

- OSHA Policies Concerning Employees Working From Home (Archive), November 15, 1999
- OSHA Directive CPL 2.0.125, "Home-Based Worksites", February 25, 2000
- U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Enforcement Guidance: Reasonable Accommodation and Undue Hardship Under the Americans with Disabilities Act