7 Ways to Optimize Health While Working from Home

Today, as we adapt to a "new normal" of social distancing, an unprecedented number of people find themselves working from home for the first time—and likely for the long-term. As a follow-on to our recent feature, 6 Ways to Stay Engaged While Social Distancing, we're digging into opportunities to enhance holistic health among remote workers. Data collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic found that only 29% of US workers were able to work at home, even occasionally, and only 15% of workers reported days when they exclusively worked from home.[1]

Many of us are finding that our current ad hoc home offices leave much to be desired. Even in the best of times, working from home is often associated with increased stress and a blurring of work-life boundaries. According to a 2017 United Nations Report, remote workers experience significantly higher stress than office workers, with 41% of remote workers reporting high stress levels compared to only 25% of office workers.[2]

Our work environment and daily routines have a profound impact on our health—influencing everything from our mental well-being to our chronic disease risks.[3] Even as communities begin gradually lifting restrictions related to COVID-19, it's expected that remote work guidelines will remain in place for months to come. In light of this new reality, we reviewed Fitwel's 63+ evidence-based, health-promoting workplace strategies and identified several interventions that can be readily adapted to support holistic health while working from home.

[1] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019). 29 percent of wage and salary workers could work at home in their primary job in 2017-18. Retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2019/29-percent-of-wage-and-salary-workers-could-work-at-home-in-their-primary-job-in-2017-18.htm

[2] Eurofound and the International Labour Office. (2017). Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of work, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and the International Labour Office, Geneva.

[3] Eurofound and the International Labour Office. (2017). Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of work, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and the International Labour Office, Geneva.

[4] An, M., et al. (2016). Why we need more nature at work: Effects of natural elements and sunlight on employee mental health and work attitudes. PLOS One, 11(5).

[5] Toyoda, M., et al. (2020). Potential of a Small Indoor Plant on the Desk for Reducing Office Workers' Stress. HortTechnology, 30(1), 55-63.

[6] Harb, F., Hidalgo, M. P., & Martau, B. (2015). Lack of exposure to natural light in the workspace is associated with physiological, sleep and depressive symptoms.

How can you build healthy routines when working remotely?

Connect with Nature

Prioritize Daylighting

Build in Regular Activity

Install Shading Options

Establish Cleaning Schedules

Eat Healthy and Stay Hydrated

Integrate Fresh Air

1. Connect with Nature.

Views of nature have a calming effect, which can contribute to reduced stress and enhanced mental health.[4] Set up your work station near a window that offers views of outdoor nature, such as street trees or gardens. Consider adding indoor natural elements to your home office like house plants, a DIY green wall, or other home-friendly biophilic design features. [5]

2. Prioritize Daylighting.

Greater access to sunlight during the workday is associated with higher melatonin levels at night—which in turn contributes to diminished depressive symptoms and enhanced sleep quality.[6,7] In addition to window access while you work, take the opportunity to step outside a few times each day to soak up extra sunlight.[8]

3. Build in Regular Activity.

Decreasing sedentary time can promote feelings of well-being and enhanced mental health, [9,10] and regular walks during work hours have been shown to improve enthusiasm and relaxation, and reduce nervousness.[11] Find ways to incorporate more physical activity throughout your day, for example by setting up a standing desk, taking a stroll during conference calls, or using mini-breaks throughout the day to get moving—try online workouts, gardening, or even a home dance party!

4. Install Shading Options.

You may have already noticed that shading can be vital when it comes to optimizing your video call set-up. Manual blinds, curtains, or other window treatments allow for control over the amount of sunlight reaching your workspace, which can contribute to increased comfort levels and enhanced mental health.[12]

5. Establish Cleaning Schedules.

Regular cleaning of bathrooms and kitchens can reduce transmission of diseases while also supporting indoor air quality and improved mental health.[13, 14, 15] Establish a cleaning schedule for your home, coordinating with your household to ensure that all areas are properly disinfected. Make sure hand-washing remains a collective habit, even at home.

[7] Hickie, I. B., & Rogers, N. L. (2011). Novel melatonin-based therapies: potential advances in the treatment of major depression. The Lancet, 378(9791), 621-631.

[8] Edwards, L. & Torcellini, P. (2002). A literature review of the effects of natural light on building occupants. National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

[9] Garland, E., et al. (2018). Stand Up to Work: assessing the health impact of adjustable workstations. International Journal of Workplace Health Management, 11(2), 895.

[10] Kilpatrick, M., et al. (2013). Cross-sectional associations between sitting at work and psychological distress: Reducing sitting time may benefit mental health. Mental Health and Physical Activity, 6(2), 103-109.

[11] Thøgersen-Ntoumani, C., et al. (2015). Changes in work affect in response to lunchtime walking in previously physically inactive employees: A randomized trial. Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, 25(6), 778-787.

[12] Lamb, S., & Kwok, K.C. (2015). A longitudinal investigation of work environment stressors on the performance and wellbeing of office workers. Applied Ergonomics, 52, 104-111.

[13] Medrano-Félix, A., et al. (2011). Impact of prescribed cleaning and disinfectant use on microbial contamination in the home. 110(2), 463-471.

[14] Franke, D. L., et al. (1997). Cleaning for improved indoor air quality: An initial assessment of effectiveness. Indoor Air, 7(1), 41-54.

6. Eat Healthy and Stay Hydrated.

The environment where we eat can influence our dietary habits. A systematic review looking at human attention in relation to food consumption suggests that eating while we are distracted can lead to greater food intake.[16] Strive for more mindful eating by stepping away from your computer at lunchtime, making sure the healthiest choices are the ones in easy reach, and keeping water at your workspace. For guidance on how to snack smart, click here to view the Fitwel Food and Beverage Standard.

7. Integrate Fresh Air.

Bringing outdoor air in, also known as ventilation, can help improve air exchange, and enhance indoor air quality.[17] Natural ventilation practices can be as simple as opening a window or door. As always, context is important, and in areas with high pollution levels filtration considerations may be appropriate.[18] Also, try to get outside each day, because there is nothing quite like a little fresh air to help fight off stress and anxiety, and improve overall mental health.[19]

While this is certainly not an exhaustive list, it's a good place to start for all of us who are striving to stay healthy while working remotely. We invite you to take one step to enhance your home office today! Use the hashtag #HealthyHomeOffice to let us know how you are adapting your home to be a healthier, more comfortable working environment.

[15] Rashid, M. & Zimring, C. (2008). A review of the empirical literature on the relationships between indoor environment and stress in health care and office settings problems and prospects of sharing evidence. Environment and Behavior, 40(2), 151–190.

[16] Robinson, E., et al. (2013). Eating attentively: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effect of food intake memory and awareness on eating. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 97(4), 728-42

[17] Carrer, P., et al. (2015). What does the scientific literature tell us about the ventilation–health relationship in public and residential buildings? Building and Environment, 94, 273-286.

[18] Ren, J., et al. (2017). Influencing factors and energy-saving control strategies for indoor fine particles in commercial office buildings in six Chinese cities. Energy and Buildings, 149, 171-179.

[19] Beyer, K. M. M., Szabo, A., & Nattinger, A. B. (2016). Time Spent Outdoors, Depressive Symptoms, and Variation by Race and Ethnicity. 51(3), 281-290.

Additional Resources

New York Times: New Research Links Air Pollution to Higher Coronavirus Death Rates →

CityLab: Mapping How Cities Are Reclaiming Street Space →

NPR: Who's Hit Hardest By COVID-19? Why Obesity, Stress And Race All Matter →

Center for Workplace Mental Health: Working Remotely During COVID-19 →

World Economic Forum: How to navigate the tranistion to remote work during the COVD-19 pandemic →

State of the Planet: Earth Day: How to Celebrate While You're Sheltering in Place →

Earth Day 2020 Website →

For more guidance on how to apply Fitwel and contribute to building health for all™, visit fitwel.org.