



# Chronic Stress and the Remote Worker

**How movement can help lower stress and boost well-being**

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## INTRODUCTION

When business leaders sent their teams to work from home in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, most employees didn't have a home office.<sup>1</sup> Against the backdrop of a global health emergency, workers had to quickly determine how to create an effective space to work at home without much time to plan or prepare.

As the temporary work from home experiment stretched from weeks to months, we've fundamentally shifted where and how we work. While some companies have stated that their employees may work from home forever, a substantial portion of businesses will likely adopt a hybrid model where employees split time between home and the office.

To keep remote employees comfortable, healthy and productive for the long haul, it's necessary that both employees and the leadership teams that support them take action. Living and working during a once-in-a-generation pandemic creates an undercurrent of chronic stress for many workers. Physical health, mental health and workday comfort must be prioritized as they all play a role in encouraging, or discouraging, well-being.

### The Impact of Chronic Stress

Everyone experiences stress; it's part of being human. Stress responses, like innate fight-or-flight reactions, are hard-wired in our nervous systems to protect us from potential threats and predators. Fear is useful, particularly when it helps us notice and avoid imminent, life-threatening danger. When you slam on the brakes to avoid colliding with a car that pulls out in front of you unexpectedly, fear is crucial. In this situation, the perceived danger sets off a near-instantaneous sympathetic nervous system response, releasing hormones that prime your body to respond to the threat. When the danger has passed (and you breathe a sigh of relief in your car), the parasympathetic nervous system helps calm the hormonal and physiological stress response and return the body to normal.

Chronic low-level stress is a different story. When people feel constantly anxious, stress hormone levels may remain elevated. This can result in irritability, sadness, anxiety, depression, digestive issues, headaches and insomnia.<sup>2</sup> Stress may cause other issues that are harder to identify, such

as inflammation and compromised immune function.<sup>3</sup> Chronic stress can exacerbate conditions like hypertension and diabetes<sup>4</sup> and lead to unhealthy behaviors such as overeating or not eating enough, or excessive alcohol consumption or drug abuse.<sup>5</sup>

And alarmingly, chronic stress may change how our brains work by impairing prefrontal activity (where we do our logical, higher-level thinking) and strengthening amygdala responses (the part of our brain that activates our fight-or-flight reaction).<sup>6</sup> To put it simply, over time, chronic stress wears the body down.<sup>7</sup>



***In addition to chronic stress and associated symptoms, remote workers are also at risk for a common and well-documented health issue: inactivity.***



Scientists are beginning to examine the widespread impact of pandemic stress. In June 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted a study of 5,412 U.S. adults.<sup>8</sup> The researchers found that 40% of adults were struggling with various mental health conditions. Thirty-one percent of adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, which is roughly triple the reported incidence of anxiety and depression in the first half of 2019.<sup>7</sup>

Another study examined the link between stress cardiomyopathy, commonly referred to as broken heart syndrome, and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Symptoms of stress cardiomyopathy mimic those of a heart attack, including chest pain and heart dysfunction, but lack the typical physiological causes of a heart attack, such as blood flow blockages. Patients diagnosed with stress cardiomyopathy often report some type of stress, either emotional or physical, in the days prior to the onset of symptoms. Reports of stress cardiomyopathy nearly quadrupled early in the pandemic in comparison to earlier timeframes.

#### **Why Movement Matters for Physical and Mental Well-Being**

It's unsurprising that workers are experiencing chronic stress as they navigate the unknowns of the pandemic. Unfortunately, in addition to chronic stress and associated symptoms, remote workers are also at risk for a common and well-documented health issue: inactivity. In recent years, research continues to link sitting to various illnesses. Studies show that a sedentary lifestyle may increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and Type 2 diabetes.<sup>10, 11, 12</sup> Researchers at UCLA found a link between too much sitting time and a thinning in the part of the brain that stores memories.<sup>13</sup> There's also a correlation between how much total time we sit throughout the day and how long we sit at a time—both are associated with increased mortality risk.<sup>14</sup>



When workers are home, they miss opportunities for spontaneous physical activity that they commonly engaged in at the office. At home, workers aren't walking from their desks to conference rooms or a colleague's desk. They're not taking the stairs instead of the elevator. They don't hit the gym on their way home from work. Rather, they may sit for most of the workday and then sit at night while they have dinner and watch TV.

Many employees also benefitted from a much better desk setup in the office. Not all workers have dedicated office space at home, but even if they do, comfortable, ergonomic furniture, like height-adjustable **standing desks**, **mobile desks** or **monitor arms**, may not be available.

As employees grappled with how to work from home comfortably, social media was flooded with images of people working on couches and coffee tables, using ironing boards as standing desks and perching computer monitors on cardboard boxes. These types of setups can work temporarily, but they're far from ideal for the long-term. After months of working in uncomfortable positions, workers may experience injuries, including back pain or discomfort in the shoulders, arms or upper extremities.

Movement benefits our physical health and research shows that movement may positively impact our mental health, too. It's important to note that determining how to best support one's mental health is complex and individual needs vary widely; guidance from a qualified professional is recommended. But for some, simply moving more may help boost mental well-being.



A recent study examined how sedentary time and insomnia were linked with depressive and anxiety symptoms surrounding COVID-19. Researchers discovered that more physical activity correlated with lower risk for anxiety, depression and insomnia.<sup>15</sup> Scientists at Johns Hopkins University discovered that increasing physical activity appears to be followed by a boost in mood and perceived energy level.<sup>16</sup> Another study found evidence suggesting that the risk of anxiety increases as sedentary time increases.<sup>17</sup> Other researchers have found that sitting more may lead to psychological distress<sup>18</sup> or depressive symptoms.<sup>19</sup>

Why does sitting less and moving more help mental wellness? That's not an easy question to answer since various biochemical mechanisms play a role, such as increasing serotonin levels or brain-derived neurotrophic factor.<sup>20</sup> Some data suggest that people who experience depressive symptoms may have a smaller hippocampus, the part of the brain that helps to regulate mood. Physical activity can support nerve cell growth in that region of the brain, which may help reduce feelings of depression.<sup>21</sup> The research is compelling and exciting—incorporating frequent movement into our daily lives can have a powerful mood-boosting effect.

### **Spinal Health, Awkward Postures and Chronic Stress**

Spinal health is connected to chronic stress. For employees who spend their days hunched over a laptop, this type of awkward, slouchy posture puts pressure on the spine. In turn, that stress can directly impact the autonomic nervous system (ANS) and how chronic stress is experienced in the body. The parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems are part of the ANS. The sympathetic system is responsible for the fight-or-flight response and the parasympathetic system is responsible for calming us down, sometimes referred to as the rest-and-digest response. These two systems work in harmony and without our conscious control.

Dr. Mark Vettraino, a spinal biomechanics specialist, explains that, “the on/off switch to the sympathetic chain is in the thoracolumbar region of the spine—from the bottom of the ribcage to the start of the lower back. Awkward postures that stress this area can stimulate the fight-or-flight system and put our body on high alert, and continued stimulation may lead to chronic stress.”

## *Ideas to Keep Moving While Working from Home:*



**MOVE EVERY 30 MINUTES.** AT THE TOP AND BOTTOM OF EACH HOUR, GET UP TO REFILL YOUR WATER, STRETCH OR DO A FEW LAPS AROUND YOUR HOME.



**STAND DURING MEETINGS OR CONFERENCE CALLS.** THIS IS A SIMPLE WAY TO REMIND YOURSELF TO STAND THROUGHOUT THE DAY.



**FIND AN ONLINE STRETCHING CLASS.** TAKE A BREAK TO RELAX AND RELIEVE TENSION. YOU CAN DO MANY STRETCHES RIGHT AT YOUR DESK.



**TAKE A WALK AROUND THE BLOCK.** WHILE YOU'RE AT IT, CALL A FRIEND THAT YOU HAVEN'T TALKED TO RECENTLY OR CATCH UP ON A FAVORITE PODCAST.



**TURN ON A FAVORITE SONG AND DANCE.** FROM BOOSTING BRAINPOWER TO IMPROVING HEART HEALTH, DANCING IS EXCELLENT FOR YOUR WELL-BEING.<sup>22</sup>

Movement matters, too, especially for the intervertebral discs in your back. When you sit for lengthy periods, from 20 minutes to one hour, the discs between the spinal vertebrae begin to shrink in size. In a healthy state, these discs are like gelatinous sponges. But after 20 or more minutes without moving, the discs settle into a more clay-like state. The reason for this is that after about age 10, we begin to lose the direct blood supply to our intervertebral discs. As adults, our bodies rely on osmosis to provide our discs with nutrition to keep them healthy, and movement is vital to this process. Discs that are well-lubricated take pressure off nerve roots, reducing pain.

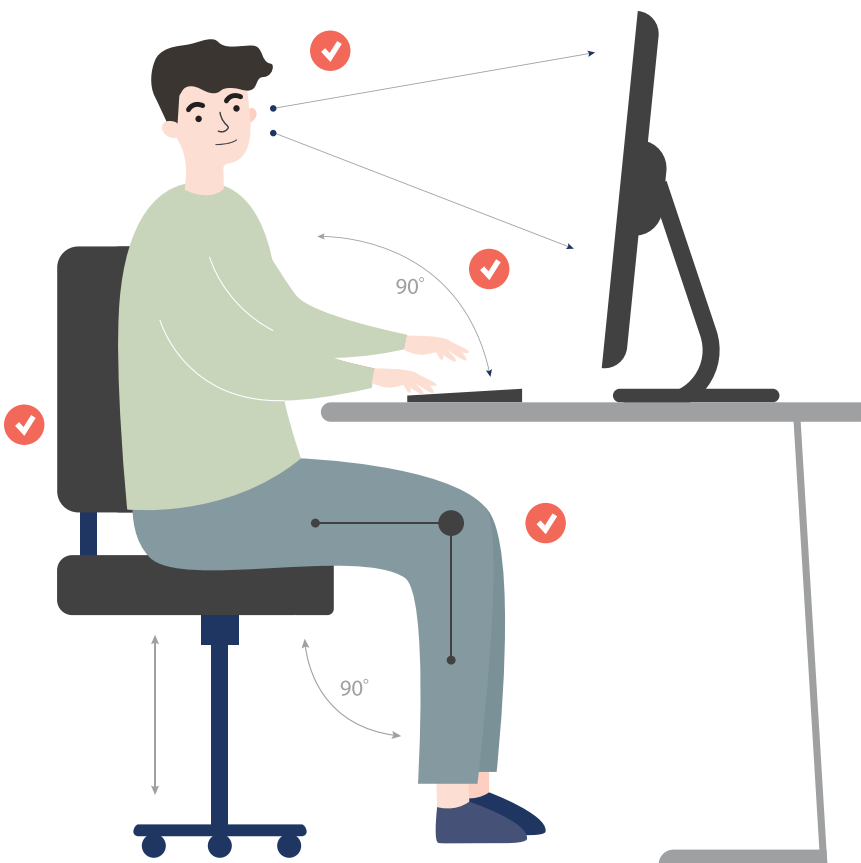
How do you create a workstation that supports your spine and your overall health? It's simple—create a comfortable home workspace, follow basic ergonomic principles and move frequently. Ergonomics may sound complicated, but the concept is simple: adapt your workspace to fit you rather than forcing your body into uncomfortable postures.



### Create a Comfortable Home Workspace

A common saying in the world of ergonomics is “the next posture is the best posture.” No matter how ergonomic your workspace, make sure you frequently take breaks from whatever position you’ve been holding, whether that’s sitting or standing. Move and stretch, relax your eyes, wrists, hands and body. You can optimize various parts of your workspace to stay comfortable and productive as you work. Here’s how to do it.

**CHAIR:** Sit back in your chair so that you have lumbar support. A rolled-up towel can work if your chair doesn’t have lumbar support. If your chair is adjustable, raise or lower it so that your feet are flat on the floor and your knees are at about the same height as your hips. Adjust to your comfort but keep a nice open angle between your torso and legs.



**KEYBOARD:** After you adjust your chair, check your keyboard height. It should be level with your elbow and your wrists should remain flat. If your elbows are lower than the keyboard, raise your chair, and add a footrest to keep your feet flat on the floor. If your keyboard is still too high, add a keyboard tray that goes below your desk surface. If your elbows are higher than the keyboard, consider a back-tilt keyboard tray to maintain flat wrists.

**FAVORITE TOOLS:** Keep the things you use frequently close to your body so you’re not reaching for your notebook or phone all day long.

**MONITORS:** Your monitors should be about an arm’s length away from your eyes and you should look slightly down when viewing the center of the screen. Avoid straining your neck up or down when viewing. The top of the monitor should be at or slightly below eye level. A desk or wall-mounted **monitor arm** allows you to position one or more monitors exactly where you need them.

***Move frequently throughout the day.***

***If you have a height-adjustable standing desk, switch between sitting and standing every 30 minutes for better productivity and well-being.***

**ANTI-FATIGUE MAT AND FOOTREST:** A quality **anti-fatigue floor mat** stimulates blood circulation and helps prevent fatigue. When you stand on an anti-fatigue mat, shift your weight from one leg to the other to keep moving slightly and to avoid muscle strain. When sitting, you can use a footrest if needed to stay comfortable and keep your feet on the floor. Maintain an angle between 90° and 120° at your hips to avoid transferring stress to your lower back.

**MOVEMENT:** Move frequently throughout the day. If you have a height-adjustable **standing desk**, switch between sitting and standing every 30 minutes for better productivity and well-being. If you don't have a standing desk, get up every 30–60 minutes and walk around for a few minutes.

**POSTURE:** Maintain a relaxed, neutral posture with your chest open, shoulders down and chin slightly down. Keep your upper arms roughly parallel with your torso so your shoulders aren't extended; that can build stress in your upper body.

***For more ergonomic tips and tools, visit [ergotron.com/ergonomics](https://www.ergotron.com/ergonomics).***

IF YOU'RE MISSING SOME OF THE COMPONENTS OF A HEALTHY WORKSPACE, LIKE A **HEIGHT-ADJUSTABLE STANDING DESK** OR **MONITOR ARM**, IT'S WORTH CHECKING IN WITH YOUR MANAGER OR HUMAN RESOURCES TEAM. THEY MAY OFFER STIPENDS OR REIMBURSE HOME OFFICE FURNITURE OR EQUIPMENT PURCHASES. EMPLOYERS ARE MOTIVATED TO KEEP THEIR REMOTE TEAMS COMFORTABLE AND PRODUCTIVE, SO THEY MAY COVER THOSE COSTS OR HAVE AN EQUIPMENT PURCHASE PROGRAM ESTABLISHED ALREADY.

## CONCLUSION

Employees worldwide are facing heightened levels of stress, including chronic stress, as they adapt to changes in their work and personal lives. Moving more, sitting less and creating a comfortable home office setup can positively impact well-being, including physical health, mental health and spinal health. With frequent movement and a healthy workspace setup, employees are empowered to work in a way that's comfortable and supports their well-being now and well into the future.



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APAC: [apaccustomerservice@ergotron.com](mailto:apaccustomerservice@ergotron.com)

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