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WORKING FROM HOME: OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY CHALLENGE

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WORKING FROM HOME

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic impact on the world of work has been both devastating and far-reaching. It brought new challenges in occupational health and safety and fundamental rights at work. As a result, as of mid-April 2020, 59 countries had implemented telework for non-essential publicly employed staff and whether in lockdown or not, governments across the world have encouraged employers to allow working from home as a means to further social distancing. (ILO.org, 2020) Pandemic continues to severely affect public health and cause unprecedented disruptions to economies and labour markets (Ekpanyaskul, 2021) Nowadays, Technological developments enable an increasing digitalization as well as growing globalizing endeavour so Work from Home is becoming the 'New Normal' in this era (. Robelski, 2019)

Work from home describes an environment where individuals are able to do their jobs from inside their own homes rather than from within an office. It is facilitated through the use of software and virtual tools that enable communication, collaboration, and coordination. (wrike.com, n.d.) (Ekpanyaskul, 2021) Managerial, academics, technicians and clerical are most suited jobs for WFH.



Figure 1
https://www.mbaskool.com/2020_images/stories/a_pr_images/work_from_home.png

TERMINOLOGY

- **Lower Exposure Risk:** Jobs that do not require close contact (within 6 feet for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period) with other people. Workers in this category have minimal occupational contact with the public and other coworkers. Examples include: Remote workers (i.e., those working from home during the pandemic). Office workers who do not have frequent close contact with coworkers, customers, or the public. Healthcare workers providing only telemedicine services. (<https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/hazards>, n.d.)
- **Work Isolation:** Remote work transition impact on limited social interaction with co-workers, disconnect virtual conversation leaving people lonely and isolated. Isolation is linked with depression, anxiety and other somatic symptoms
- **Anxiety, Stress and Pressure:** During working from home, anxiety and stress takes on many forms, including

pressure to be busy 24/7. WFH requires time management, IT troubleshooting, higher levels of organisation in less convenient settings, and much more. (<https://pearsonclinical.in/the-psychological-impact-of-working-from-home/>, 2021)

Types of WFH arrangement

1. Need based WFH: An employee working time threshold could be 2 to 5 days in these arrangements
2. Prolonged WFH: An employee can WFH for an extended period of time
3. Regular WFH: An employee working condition and hours option to continue WFH on a regular basis

Work life balance

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered every aspect of our work and life. It may contribute to the deterioration of workers with negative effects on their mental health and well-being and their productivity.

work-life balance that can promote a healthier lifestyle, a benefit for both physical and mental health. A common area of concern in work-life boundaries is balancing work schedules around other family members, where for some parents, worktime becomes 'porous' such as Limitation of social life due to restrictions aimed at limiting the contagion. There are blurring boundaries between personal lives and work (particularly when working from home). Some additional household chores and caregiving duties, such as childcare, home-schooling and taking care of older relatives and family members (Xiao, 2021)

CHALLENGE

- Communication
- ICT Equipment and workstation set-up
- Data protection and security

- Staff management and possible WFH arrangements
- Working time of organisation
- Occupational safety and health
- Health and mental well-being
- Maintain work-life balance
- Performance and productivity
- Caring for children and dependents
- Skills, staff training and development
- Keep up with the government's policy and directives

HEALTH HAZARDS AND RISK FOR WORKING AT HOME

According to four potential risk exposure level - very high, high, medium and lower risk, OSHA of United States Department of Labour recognise, whose working from home during pandemic has lower exposure risk

(<https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/hazards>, n.d.) There are various types of Home hazards and risk

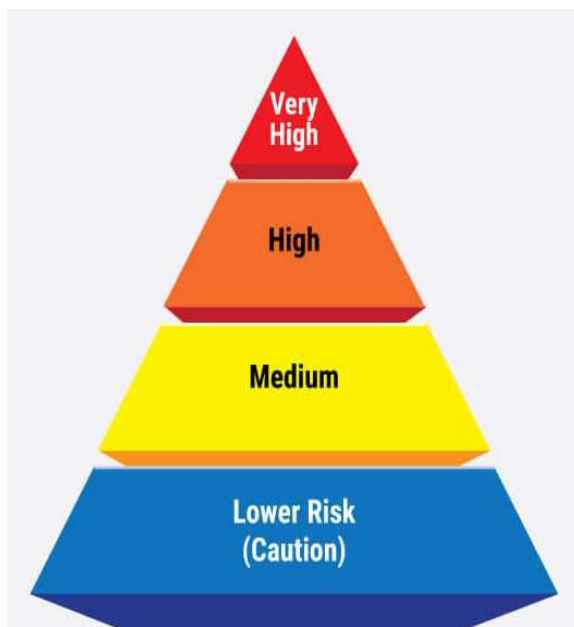


Figure 2 (risk, n.d.)

Psychosocial and Physical risk factors

- **Physical risk factors** such as full time computer work can lead to fatigue, tiredness, headache and eye related symptoms like eye irritation and mucus membrane irritation.
- Physical workstation setting or working in a variety of places such as sofas, coffee table, kitchen counters and beds. So due to improper physical workstation , prolonged sedentary activity, poor body mechanics can lead to discomfort and Musculoskeletal pain like lower back pain, cervical pain etc.
- Indoor environmental quality (IEQ) factors such as lighting, temperature, humidity, air quality, noise, ergonomics etc and working conditions factors influence a workers comfort, which in turn impacts satisfaction. It can lead to migraine and presentism
- **Psychosocial and behavioural risk factors** such as poor sleeping pattern lead to insomnia , eating habits differ body weight changes, chaotic working environment with increased distraction who have child particularly for home schooling children. Ambiguous effect in diet, sleep and addiction behavioural risks (Bouziri H & 77:509–510.)
- Those Who working and live alone, without face to face interactions and social support could contribute to mental issues such as social isolation, stress and depression. Ongoing frequent interruptions and work-family conflict can lead to burnout, loss of concentration, emotional and work exhaustion. (safetylinelneworker, n.d.) (Xiao, 2021) (Ekpanyaskul, 2021)
- Work related stress and psychosocial factors such as work overload or underload, continually subject to deadlines.

- Poor communication, lack of support for problem solving culture of the organisation.
- Career stagnation and uncertainty, underpromotion or overpromotion, poor pay affect career development
- Inadequate reliability, availability, suitability, maintenance or repair of equipment and installation
(Roquelaure, 2018)

There are a number of invisible hazards in home such as pathogen microorganisms, bacteria, viruses like COVID-19. When looking at home-work environment, look for potential hazards like gas leaks, mold, or areas with frequent human contact. Additionally, regular exposure to common dust particles can increase your chances of developing chronic respiratory and heart health issues.

Chemical home hazards

It is an unfortunate fact, but home is likely to contain a range of chemicals that cause a number of diseases and chronic conditions. Depending on the age and condition of your home, you may be exposed to harmful toxins in cleaning chemicals, asbestos, exposed ammonia and bleach, and/or drain cleaners.

Electrical home hazards

Older home may have outdated and incorrect wiring or three-pronged grounded outlets, creating more potential for electrical hazards and fires.

Fall home hazards

While it's something we don't take seriously all of the time, slips, trips and falls are a common injury for those working at home. To address this, clear routes and used

areas of any obstructions like general clutter, kids toys or loose rugs.

Biological hazards in the home

Biological hazards can be found anywhere, and exist in most unsanitary areas, and work environments. These hazards are especially pertinent in areas with poor airflow or limited ventilation. As you set up workspace at home, be mindful of the biological hazards that exist around you. The range of hazards is surprisingly broad. These include,

• Bacteria and Viruses

This is especially prevalent during the pandemic in which deadly, airborne viruses are a constant threat. In addition to COVID-19, other common viral threats are the flu and the common cold. Bacteria is also threat, especially salmonella and E. coli which can cause vomiting, fever, diarrhoeas and death in those with weakened immune systems. They are usually brought in by people and animals but can be found in the soil on property.

• Sewage

Sewage is such a common biological hazard in the home that it needs to be addressed on its own. When a pipe is leaking or broken, it is repaired as soon as possible. When a drain or toilet is backed up, it is unplugged fairly quickly but exposure to the sewage present in these common situations can cause a host of horrible diseases such as E. coli, meningitis and typhoid fever.

- **Plants, Pollens and Molds**

While fairly unassuming, the vegetation in and around the home can be a safety threat on multiple levels. Poison ivy outside can cause skin irritation and burning while the house plants like oleander can cause a severe rash, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, heart problems, and seizures if ingested. Tree, grass and ragweed pollen can cause seasonal allergies and even asthma. As homes and buildings age, mold, especially black mold, is becoming an increasing problem which can cause lung infections, chronic illness, and asthma as well. (safetylinelonerworker, n.d.)

STRENGTH

- Better work-life balance
- Possibility of working, despite reduced mobility due to illness or disability
- Reduction in commuting time and costs (and stress and fatigue related to transport)
- Flexible schedules and more decision-making latitude to manage working time
- Possible increase in autonomy at work
- Savings in office space and associated costs
- Increased attractiveness of the company: attracting and retaining qualified workers
- Increased flexibility of business activities and services (osh.wiki, 2021)
- Working from home is beneficial for employees, employers, and society in terms of the economy and the environment. Moreover, it is suitable in some unpredictable situations, such as natural disasters or epidemics (Ekpanyaskul, 2021)
- Less Traffic congestion: Indian roads are notoriously known for heavy traffic congestion. So reduced risk of road accidents because of reduced travel and other associated costs
- It helps in mitigation of air pollution (Handy and Mokhtarian, 1996). It holds special importance in Indian context as 21 of the world's 30 most polluted cities are in India and vehicular pollution constitutes a major chunk of it.

WEAKNESS

- Difficulty of separating paid work from private life
- Isolation and a lack of access to the formal and informal information sharing that takes place in a fixed place of work
- Changes in the nature of social working relationships (colleagues, management) because of distance
- Long working hours (flexible schedules can become a drawback if the worker does not impose time limits)
- Performing work outside regular business hours (during free time)
- Being confronted with problems alone, without proper support (with the associated stress)
- Developing musculoskeletal disorders if the ergonomic aspects related to ICT work are not managed properly (posture, inadequate computer workstations, etc)
- Increased OSH risks if (proper) risk assessments are not carried out
- More difficult supervision for managers and a need to find new forms of management
- Possible decrease in engagement and a drop in team spirit

- Internal communication becoming more difficult (osh.wiki, 2021)

CONTROL FOR WFH HAZARD

1. Elimination/ Substitution

- work life balance

2. Engineering Controls

- Use Ergonomic chair
- Setting up your workstation at home: ideally set up monitor height, monitor distance for eye comfort, keyboard and mouse surface, footrest, wireless headsets, earphone, angled document holder, sit/stand desk

3. Administrative Control

- Hazard prevention and control training
- Change in work procedures such as written safety policy and rules
- Health and safety training

4. Personal Protective Equipment

- Ergonomic consideration
 - Avoid working from couches or other soft surfaces that do not have a stable work surface and lack support for your back.
 - For eye protection, position your computer so windows are beside you, and not in front or behind you. Use options such as blinds or curtains to control glare and reduce risk for eyestrain.
 - Make sure to follow good housekeeping practices – clean and clutter free surfaces, electrical cords in good condition and properly positioned, safe storage of heavy or sharp items – in order to reduce the risk of common household and office injuries and illnesses.
 - As well as scheduled breaks, get up and move around periodically. Frequent micro (very short) breaks throughout

the day are important for both physical and mental health.

- If you have an adjustable chair, adjust all features to support your back, thighs, and be at a comfortable height. If you do not have an adjustable chair, use folded towels or cushions as needed for extra padding and back support.
- Position monitor/laptop screen approximately arms length away from body
- Use a footrest, box, or something sturdy to support your feet, so they are not stretching to reach the floor or causing you to perch on the front edge of your chair. (fasken, n.d.)

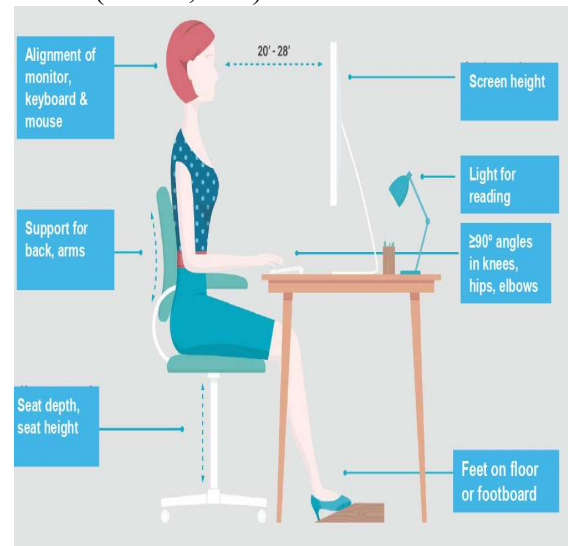


figure 3 https://ehs.stonybrook.edu/_pdf/1

- Reduce the risks related to sedentary work/Prolonged sitting. Examples of stretching exercises to be performed at regular intervals throughout the day:
 - Lift your arms above your head and make circles with your arms.
 - Shrug your shoulders and roll them backwards and forwards a few times.
 - Roll your neck gently from left to right, focusing on tight spots.
 - Roll your ankles, point your toes and flex your feet.
 - Stretch your hip flexors by pointing one knee at the floor and pushing your hips forward.

- Lean back in the chair and push your upper arms back onto the chair to stretch your chest and shoulders.
- Clasp your hands behind your chair and stretch your shoulders backward.
- Examples of sitting exercises to keep moving and active throughout the workday:
 - Squeeze your buttocks for 5-10 seconds.
 - Use a hand gripper to give your hands and forearms a workout.
 - Do bicep curls with a heavy stapler or full water bottle.
 - Swivel in your chair for an ab workout.
 - Do leg raises under your desk.
 - Squat over your chair for 15-30 seconds.
 - Raise yourself above your chair using your arms.
- Examples of exercises that can be added to your work routine:
 - Stand up or walk during phone calls if you have a hands-free phone.
 - Eat your lunch away from your desk.
 - Walk during lunch breaks and during down times.
 - Stretch at your desk every 30 minutes.
 - Stand and take a break from your computer every 30 minutes.
 - Add a minimum of 10 minutes of moderate or vigorous intensity aerobic exercise to your day, which is enough to get the heart pumping and burn calories.
 - Add more short breaks or micro breaks to your work day.
 - Agree on a maximum time slot for exposure to sedentary work, for instance a maximum of 2 consecutive hours and no more than 5 hours per shift.
- Stress and Mental health issues
 - Start and end the day with a routine or daily ritual (get dressed, go for a walk

or any other dynamic activity — without a screen) and try to begin and finish at the same time every day.

- Establish the hours during which they may be contacted (by peers or managers).
- Plan the working day and stick to it (to control their working hours to avoid too much overwork or permanent work).
- Disconnect by putting away a laptop computer or switching off the (business) phone.
- Have a specific room/space in which to work so that when this room is left work is over.
- Establish boundaries around work hours with partners, children and/or housemates. (osh.wiki, 2021)

SAFETY RETURN TO WORK

- Communication plan: Practical issues such as hygiene and social distancing measures to allay concerns.
- Connect with colleagues: Provide ways in which employees can connect with colleagues with safety
- Training: Provide managers and employees with training.
- Employee Assistance Programme: Consider introducing an EAP scheme where one does not exist.
- Flexible working practices and regular contact with employee
- Supporting discussion: ensure a successful return to work
- Refer to occupational Health: Utilise occupational health or other relevant services (ilo.org, n.d.)

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