



COVID-19: EU-OSHA Guidance to make home-based telework

Practical tips to make home-based telework as healthy, safe and effective as possible

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Introduction

Telework can be defined as the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) — such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers — for the purpose of working outside the employer's premises. This article focuses on regular home-based telework^[1] (or working from home using ICT).

In recent years, home-based [telework](#) has been on the increase. This is certainly due to the advances in ICT that have occurred in recent years and possibly due to some of the advantages associated with teleworking (mentioned below). It can also probably be explained by a reduction in some of the factors impeding the adoption of teleworking schemes in companies, such as managerial resistance and attitudes towards teleworking. The COVID-19 public health emergency prompted many workers to work from home for the first time and many of these to then do so more systematically.

Home-based telework may have an impact on the occupational safety and health (OSH) of teleworkers. For this reason, employers and workers have to be aware of the risks associated with home-based telework and address them by implementing adequate preventive and control measures. This article includes some advice and tips^[2] intended to ensure the occupational health and well-being of teleworkers.

More resources on OSH and home-based telework (guides, guidance, infographics, checklists) are available from '[Practical tools and guidance on musculoskeletal disorders](#)', developed by EU-OSHA.

Advantages and disadvantages of teleworking in the context of occupational health and well-being^[3]

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ improvement in 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)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ the 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

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ flexible schedules and more decision-making latitude to manage working time ▪ possible increase in autonomy at work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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.)
Employer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ reduced risk of road accidents because of reduced travel ▪ savings in office space and associated costs ▪ increased attractiveness of the company: attracting and retaining qualified workers ▪ increased flexibility of business activities and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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 ▪ difficulties in providing the required support to teleworkers ▪ possible decrease in engagement and a drop in team spirit ▪ internal communication becoming more difficult

Home-based telework and safety and health at work

A [European Framework Agreement on Telework](#)^[4] was concluded between the social partners (European Trade Union Confederation, BusinessEurope, European Centre of Employers and Enterprises and European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) in July 2002: most of the EU Member States have implemented the European Framework Agreement on Telework by way of national social partnership agreements. The agreement covers, among other aspects:

Health and safety: *the employer is responsible for the protection of the occupational health and safety of the teleworker in accordance with Directive 89/391 and relevant daughter directives, national legislation and collective agreements. In order to verify that the applicable health and safety provisions are correctly employed, the employer, workers' representatives and/or relevant authorities have access to the telework place, within the limits of national legislation and collective agreements. If the teleworker is working at home, such access is subject to prior notification and his/her agreement. The teleworker is entitled to request inspection visits.*

Equipment: *as a general rule, the employer is responsible for providing, installing and maintaining the equipment necessary for regular telework unless the teleworker uses his/her own equipment (...).*

Organisation of work: *within the framework of applicable legislation, collective agreements and company rules, the teleworker manages the organisation of his/her working time. The workload and performance standards of the teleworker are equivalent to those of comparable workers at the employer's premises.*

Employers have the same health and safety responsibilities for home-based teleworkers as for any other workers. These include identifying and managing the occupational risks of home-based teleworkers. The main risk assessment issues to be considered are:^[5]

- the work environment at home
- the work equipment (mainly the display screen equipment (DSE) and the workstation)
- stress and mental well-being
- working alone (in case something unexpected happens, such as an accident and illness)
- general health and safety hazards, including good standards of housekeeping to avoid [electrical risks](#), the [risks of slips, trips and falls](#), and [manual handling](#)

Work environment at home

An appropriate work environment at home may include:

- A room (ideally), and if this is not possible at least a space where the teleworker can work. This is important for different reasons^[6]
 - It allows the teleworker to be acoustically and visually isolated, facilitating concentration and minimising distractions.
 - It contributes to maintaining a boundary between work and domestic life. It is a symbolic way of establishing a divide between these two spheres: getting out of the room means leaving work.
- Adequate temperature, humidity and ventilation.
- Adequate lighting (including daylight) to perform tasks efficiently, accurately and in a healthy way.
- Adequate internet connection and telephone lines (if necessary).
- Regular checks for defects in equipment and electrical wiring.

Display screen equipment and workstation

Telework is also associated with ergonomic risks. Working with DSE, an inadequate workstation and sedentary work are related to, among other issues, eye fatigue; musculoskeletal pain and disorders; stress; mental and cognitive workload; and the health effects related to a lack of exercise/sedentarism (obesity, diabetes II, cardiovascular pathologies, etc.).

The specific equipment, material and accessories, along with the preventive measures to be adopted, should be determined through the home workstation assessment. This will need to take into account user-specific needs, space restrictions and time spent working at the computer. Depending on the teleworking agreement, the time spent working from home at the computer could vary a lot, from occasional telework (e.g. 1 day every 2 weeks) to regular telework 1 day or a few days per week or even full time.

At national level, many ministries of work (or equivalent) and/or national OSH institutes have developed basic checklists and guides that should help employers and workers assess the ergonomic risks related to computer work. Most of them are intended for the office setting within the employers' premises, but even these ones (not tailored to an office at home) provide valuable advice for teleworkers. Some examples are '[Display screen equipment \(DSE\) workstation checklist](#)' by the Health and Safety Executive; '[Home office, mobile office: managing remote working](#)' by the Institute of Occupational Safety and Health; and '[Travail sur écran – Prévention des risques](#)' by the French National Research and Safety Institute for the Prevention of Occupational Accidents and Diseases (INRS).

Tips and advice regarding DSE

- [ergonomic work furniture](#) (adjustable, adequate for different ICT tasks) that helps teleworkers to maintain a comfortable, neutral body posture with joints naturally aligned, and reduce stress and strain on the muscles, tendons and skeletal system
- use of ergonomic information technology (IT) equipment (e.g. adjustable screen holder, short keyboard), which ensures a more comfortable posture while working with a display screen
- (ideally) providing a mouse, keyboard, screen or docking station for those using a laptop regularly — for some of this equipment, this could mean allowing workers to take it home
- adequate layout of the IT equipment components on the work surface in order to ensure a comfortable working position
- ensuring sufficient space at the workstation, to allow the teleworker to have a comfortable position, change his/her position and move
- ensuring adequate [lighting](#), thermal comfort and a low [noise](#) level
- adequate layout of the air conditioning equipment to prevent draughts
- [training](#) teleworkers on the correct techniques for adjusting work furniture and using a mouse and keyboard or other data input devices, and arranging the working area to ensure a comfortable, neutral work posture
- when carrying out computer work, ensuring periodical interruptions through breaks and other non-IT activities (to avoid eye fatigue and to break prolonged sitting) — short, frequent breaks are preferable ; during the breaks, the teleworker should move away from the workstation, do [relaxing exercises](#), etc.
- avoiding eye fatigue by focusing on distant objects or blinking from time to time

- duties, expectations and deadlines should be clearly outlined and agreed upon by both the supervisor and the teleworker
- using communication tools that allow teleworkers to inform managers/co-workers when they are 'busy', 'available', 'not to be disturbed', i.e. 'busy' when they need to concentrate on certain tasks, 'available' when they can be contacted, etc.
- ensuring that work tasks are varied to avoid monotony

Simple steps/activities that can be taken to 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.
- Use a sitting calculator and change your sedentary behaviour if needed.
- Use adjustable working stations so you can work both standing up and seated.
- 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

The main sources of stress for teleworkers include long working hours; intensive and flexible work; work organisation; isolation; and the blurring of boundaries between paid work and their private lives.

Several approaches may help teleworkers to improve their [work-life balance](#). Some strategies that could be used include:

- 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.

- Plan and take regular and short breaks and a lunch break.
- 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.

Tips to prevent the feeling of being isolated, disconnected or abandoned

Isolation due to teleworking can have potential negative effects on the occupational health and well-being of teleworkers; that is why it is so important to ensure good communication between the teleworker and the employer or co-workers.

- Provision of communication tools by the employer (emails, chats, shared documents, video conferencing, collaborative work tools, shared agenda, etc.) and their related support is desirable.
- Teleworkers use the communication tools that have been put in place by the employer to stay informed about the latest developments with work, the team and the organisation.
- Teleworkers schedule regular meetings and catch up with the manager, team and clients to help maintain ongoing contact and foster positive working relationships.
- Informal contact is maintained by getting together online (virtual coffee breaks, discussion forums/chats, etc.).
- Managers keep in touch with lone workers and ensure regular contact to make sure that they are healthy and safe (recognise signs of stress).
- Teleworkers establish a routine for contact with the supervisor or co-workers.

References

1. [Jump up](#) Regular home-based telework means work done from home on a regular basis. However, it does not necessarily mean working every day from home. For example, for the analysis of the European Working Conditions Survey, the threshold used for regular home-based telework is to work at least several times a month from home.' Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017. *Working anytime, anywhere: the effects on the world of work*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, p. 13.
2. [Jump up](#) Most of the tips and advice provided in this article can be considered 'good practice' examples and are therefore not mandatory or even relevant to all home-based telework situations. Their relevance will depend on the specificities of each home-based telework situation and the outcomes of the related risk assessment carried out.
3. [Jump up](#) The content of this section is based on the information available in the following publications: Carsat Nord Picardie. *Télétravail à domicile. Guide d'aide à l'évaluation des risques et à la recherche de mesures de prévention associées. A destination des entreprises et des salariés, 2012*. pp. 7-8 (available at: <https://www.carsat-nordpicardie.fr/images/stories/GRP/mp%20teletravail.pdf>); Canadian Centre for Occupational Safety and Health. 'Telework/Telecommuting', 2020, (available at: <https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/telework.html>); Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017. *Working anytime, anywhere: the effects on the world of work*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
4. [Jump up](#) European Framework Agreement on Telework (available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Ac10131>).
5. [Jump up](#) Institution of Occupational Safety and Health, *Home office, mobile office. Managing remote working, 2014*, (available at: <https://www.iosh.com/media/1507/iosh-home-office-mobile-office-full-report-2014.pdf>).
6. [Jump up](#) Metzger, J.L. and Cleach, O., 2004. Le télétravail des cadres: entre suractivité et apprentissage de nouvelles temporalités. *Sociologie du travail* 46, 3, 433-450.