

How Remote Ergonomics Assessments Help Prevent Home Office Injuries

By **Mike Milidonis, CEAS**
National Manager,
Ergonomics and Employer
Services

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), employers are still responsible for the safety of employees while they work from home.

For many employees, remote work started as a temporary displacement from their regular office worksites due to COVID-related shutdowns. However, with the slow rollout of vaccines and variant strains circulating in the U.S., there's no telling when office buildings will be able to reopen. In fact, many companies are now contemplating remote work as the new norm.

And with good reason, research has shown that productivity levels stayed the same or were higher than pre-pandemic levels, even with staff working remotely. As a result, some companies have given employees the option to continue telecommuting for as long as they'd like. [Stanford University economist Nicholas Bloom has said COVID-19 catalyzed a new "working-from-home economy."](#)

Remote work has many other benefits, including increased employee retention, enhanced work/life balance, and access to a wider pool of applicants not limited by location. However, it also comes with risks. According to the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\)](#), employers are still responsible for the safety of employees while they work from home. Regardless of the location, if employees are injured while completing a work task during designated work hours, their injuries are still compensable under workers' compensation.

One risk is employees who predominantly perform computer-based work could sustain musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, back and neck pain, especially if they don't adhere to ergonomic best practices. According to OSHA, work-related MSDs are the most widespread occupational health hazard. Nearly two million workers suffer work-related MSDs every year. Direct costs attributable to MSDs are \$15 to \$20 billion per year, with total annual costs reaching \$45 to \$54 billion.¹

1. https://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_id=1666p_table=TESTIMONIES

If workstations aren't properly configured, employees can be forced into poor posture, which could reduce their productivity, create discomfort, and eventually result in injury.

The problem: Improper at-home workstation setup

For many employees, their homes were not equipped with a dedicated office space. As a result, short of moving or being able to repurpose an unused room, employees often had to re-engineer existing space to serve as their workstations. This often meant they went from a well-equipped desk with an adjustable chair, monitor, keyboard, and mouse—to using a laptop, tablet, and cell phone at a dining room table or kitchen counter.

If workstations aren't properly configured, employees can be forced into poor posture, which could reduce their productivity, create discomfort, and eventually result in injury.

Injury prevention with remote ergonomics assessments

To prevent injuries, employers should provide ergonomic tools, including tip sheets, checklists, and ergonomics assessments for remote employees. This will help ensure that at-home workstations meet basic best practices. These tools are quite economical, especially when weighed against the duration with which employees may be working from home.

Ideally, ergonomics should be used as a preventative measure. For instance, it's better to perform an ergonomics assessment upfront to ensure employees have well-configured workstations that ensure proper neutral posture. The second best option is to perform an assessment when an employee experiences some discomfort but has not yet sustained an injury.

If companies previously transitioned staff to work remotely during COVID shutdowns, but didn't provide assessments at the onset, they may still want to consider doing so, especially if they anticipate remote-work arrangements will be offered beyond the pandemic.

To initiate a remote ergonomics assessment with Genex, contact ergonomics@genexservices.com

Setting up a remote ergonomics assessment

When an employer needs an ergonomics assessment, it's important to gather and provide the right information upfront to ensure a successful outcome. This involves filling out a request form and submitting it to an ergonomics service provider, like Genex Services.

It's also helpful if the employee can submit photos of his or her workstation. These photos will enable the ergonomics specialist to preview any ergonomic issues. Helpful workstation photos include:

- Profile shots of the workstation from both the right and left sides showing the seated posture with the chair and monitor in the photo.
- A photo of the employee's hands and wrists while using the keyboard and mouse.
- Pictures of any activity resulting in employee discomfort.

During the remote ergonomics assessment

Once the ergonomics service provider receives the request and accompanying photos, an ergonomics specialist will reach out to the employee to schedule the consultation. The assessment can be done over the phone or via a web-based videoconferencing platform, depending on the employee's preference and needs.

Ergonomics specialists often use the Rapid Office Strain Assessment (ROSA) to conduct their evaluation. This model helps quantify risks associated with computer work and establish a plan to minimize employee discomfort. During the assessment, the ergonomics specialist will ask questions to understand the employee's work habits, postures, and any related discomfort. The specialist also provides education on proper posture, equipment adjustment, and work habits to avoid discomfort and injury.

After the assessment, the ergonomics specialist provides a report that details the risk factors, recommendations to reduce risks, and equipment that may assist in minimizing discomfort. Ergonomics specialists will advise employees on proper setup and use of available equipment. And if needed, they can provide unbiased equipment recommendations for additional equipment.

After the assessment, the ergonomics specialist provides a report that details the risk factors, recommendations to reduce risks, and equipment that may assist in minimizing discomfort.

Commonly identified issues

Through pictures or videoconferencing with employees, ergonomics specialists will review an employee's workstation to detect any ergonomic issues. Common problems might fall into these general areas:

- **Workstations that require personalized configuration.** As previously mentioned, employees could be using a kitchen table as a workstation. The table might be too high, depending on the person's height. The ergonomics specialist might recommend an employee use a higher chair or elevate themselves using a pillow or additional cushioning. If the employee's feet are dangling off the floor, a footrest or box can be used for support. Another solution might be a clamp-on articulating keyboard and mouse tray installed beneath the table to lower the keyboard and mouse to the appropriate height.

- **Inappropriate seated postures.** Many employees don't have adjustable office chairs at home. Some employees might think sitting on a couch will be comfortable. However, they quickly realize that slouching over a laptop, especially if they're using a coffee table as a work surface, creates discomfort. No matter what type of chair employees use—whether a dining room or accent chair—the ergonomics specialist will walk them through a process to ensure the chair facilitates good seated posture.

Employees might assume if they feel discomfort when sitting, they need a sit-to-stand desk. However, while it is good to change posture throughout the day from sitting to standing, if employees have a bad seated posture, they'll likely continue to have the same discomfort. Even before suggesting a sit-to-stand desk solution, an ergonomics specialist will ensure the employee has a well-aligned seated posture.

- **Improper positioning of devices.** Besides a chair and desk, other equipment must be properly positioned to enable a neutral posture. Many remote employees are using laptops. However, use of a laptop can cause employees to lean forward increasing neck, shoulder, and upper back discomfort. Ergonomics specialists will often recommend a separate keyboard and mouse, as well as raising the laptop, so the screen is aligned with the employee's eyes when seated with the back against the chair.

In other situations, the ergonomics specialist may notice that an employee's monitor is situated too far from where the employee is seated. They may ask, "Do you find yourself leaning forward throughout the day to view your screen?"

- **Prolonged work.** When employees work from home, they tend to work longer hours and take fewer breaks. They don't have coworkers coming to their desk, suggesting they grab a cup of coffee or lunch. As such, at-home employees tend to stay in a static posture for longer periods. Ergonomic specialists will assess their work habits and provide recommendations, such as taking short breaks or switching from sitting to standing one or two times every hour for a total of sixteen times a day. Above all else, employees will be reminded that movement throughout the day is key.

If remote-work conditions lead to an MSD, employers should perform an ergonomics assessment to ensure employees don't return to the same setup, leading to potential re-injury.

When an MSD is sustained

If employees do sustain work-related MSDs, they will often take time off from work for treatment and recovery. Unfortunately, a lot of times when they return to work, no changes have been made to their workstations. Of course, MSDs are due to multiple factors, but if job duties and the work environment are contributing factors—including at-home workstations—then employers should assess workstations to ensure employees don't return to the same scenario. There may be easy fixes, such as adjusting the height of a keyboard or using a different mouse.

Ergonomics beyond COVID-19

To further reduce injuries, employers are working with ergonomics specialists to develop a list of suggested equipment and ergonomic best practices for their remote employees. This list often suggests basic equipment and addresses common ergonomic issues.

For companies that have begun to bring office staff back, they have adopted in-office safety protocols to minimize the spread of COVID-19. For example, they have smaller groups of employees work onsite on certain days to reduce the number of employees in the office and to ensure social distancing. In this environment, many companies have policies that prohibit visitors to the office. For these companies, remote ergonomics assessments are also a good option for employees who have returned to the office.

A remote ergonomics assessment is a tool to help reduce employee discomfort, prevent injuries, increase productivity, and maintain a safe work environment whether employees are remote or onsite.

As the pandemic continues and vaccines become available, we'll have to wait and see if remote-work patterns continue, or if employees want to return to corporate offices. But no matter the scenario, the remote ergonomics assessment is a tool to help reduce employee discomfort, prevent injuries, increase productivity, and maintain a safe work environment whether employees are remote or onsite.

About the Author

Mike Milidonis is the national manager of ergonomics and employer services at Genex Services. He develops and oversees national ergonomics, return-to-work, and physical demands analysis programs and services in the U.S. and Canada. He is responsible for the continuous education and training of all Genex ergonomic evaluators and has provided ergonomics and physical demand analyses for over 20 years. He holds degrees in biomechanics, kinesiology, and education, as well as the certified ergonomics assessment specialist (CEAS) designation.

About Genex Services, LLC

Genex Services (www.genexservices.com) provides best-in-class clinical solutions that enable customers to transform their bottom lines while enhancing the lives of injured and disabled workers. Genex, a clinical management leader throughout North America, serves the top under-writers of workers' compensation, automobile, disability insurance, third-party administrators and a significant number of Fortune 500 employers. In addition, Genex clinical services are enhanced by intelligent systems and 360-degree data analysis. Its clinical expertise consistently drives superior results related to medical, wage loss, and productivity costs associated with claims in the workers' compensation, disability, automobile, and health care systems. Genex Services and Mitchell International merged recently to create the broadest continuum of technology and products servicing the auto, workers' compensation, and disability markets.



Genex Services
440 East Swedesford Road > Wayne, PA 19087
888.GO.GENEX > genexservices.com