

Your healthy HOME



PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

Whether you're a family, couple or live alone, we're all spending considerably more time in our houses. So how can we make them safe, healthy and happy places to be? **Louise Atkinson** finds out.

CLEAN UP

If you previously relied on a cleaner or a weekly whip around with the vacuum cleaner, it's probably time to up your home hygiene game. Dr Lisa Ackerley (thehygienedoctor.co.uk), an environmental health practitioner, recommends renewed vigilance about regularly wiping down surfaces – not just the obvious ones. 'Viruses are most likely to spread around the home via surfaces that are frequently touched by hands such as computer keyboards, TV remotes, telephones, kettle handles, door handles, tap handles, toilet seats and flush handles,' she says.

A flick with a duster or a damp cloth is unlikely to be enough. Dr Ackerley recommends disinfecting these 'high frequency touch surfaces' at least daily using a bleach-based disinfectant product. 'Good old-fashioned bleach, when diluted, is an excellent disinfectant on visibly-clean surfaces – you can make your own spray diluting one part bleach to 100 parts water. It can be unsuitable for some surfaces, in which case use Dettol spray instead.'

We are all now well-conditioned to wash our hands thoroughly and regularly with soap, but Dr Ackerley says we should repeat the process as soon as returning home, after using the lavatory, before handling food and before eating with fingers. She also suggests saving hand sanitiser for when you are out – immediately after leaving the supermarket and before you get in the car.

Finally, avoid turning the central heating up too high. According to the World Health Organisation, 18 degrees is the ideal temperature for your thermostat (as long as you're healthy); and do open a window whenever possible to let in fresh air, particularly if a member of your family is unwell.

KEEP CALM

Endless days stuck at home can send even the calmest types stir crazy. Anxiety is worse when the brain has space to be scared, so fill your time and focus with tasks that bring joy, and build purpose and meaning in your life. Learn the piano, a foreign language, or start to work through all the books and movies you've longed to read and watch. Or sign up to @64millionartists on Instagram, which offers a series of creative challenges suitable for all. And work on feeling grateful. Research shows that practising gratitude is strongly associated with greater happiness – so get into the habit of writing down three things you are thankful for every day, whether that's a walk in the sunshine, a piping hot bath, or the fact that you made it to bedtime without shouting at anyone.

Regular communication with friends, family and neighbours via phone or video chats is very important to maintain perspective, provide distraction and lift mood. 'Humans are social creatures,' says consultant clinical psychologist Dr Frances Goodhart, 'so staying connected is really important – otherwise being unable to socialise can swiftly become an additional stressor.' In these uncertain times, our relationships with others has never been more important and connecting via technology provides an opportunity to share any fears, swap positive stories and observations, and – if you're lucky – to have a laugh.

Connecting with others also offers the chance to offer support. 'Helping others helps us,' adds Harley Street psychologist Dr Meg Arroll. 'Research shows that small acts

of kindness can have a greater impact on our wellbeing than the "cost" (in terms of time or money) of the action.' Although face-to-face contact might be limited, help might take the form of giving to food banks, becoming part of telephone befriending services for vulnerable people, or engaging in online community support.

WORKING FROM HOME

If you're suddenly having to work from home, success depends on two factors: a conducive environment and a regular work schedule. If you have the space, set up a workstation (even if it's a camping table in the bedroom). This can help to trick your brain into thinking you're at work. Ensure other people in the house understand that this is a do-not-disturb zone at important times.

Dr Arroll advises setting, and keeping, a regular work schedule too: 'You may not want to set your alarm at the crack of dawn if there's no rush for a commute, but keeping to regular sleep and wake times will help maintain your circadian rhythm. This is important as sleep quality and quantity can be disrupted if your body clock gets out of synch, which can lead to fatigue, daytime sleepiness, low mood and problems with concentration.'

Scheduled breaks are key, says Dr Arroll – and try Skype/

HOME WORKOUTS

Exercise is a great way to counteract the stress of too much time cooped up in one place, so get moving – even if you can't get out.

- **JOG AROUND THE GARDEN**, run up and down a flight of stairs, do a series of sit-ups. Consultant clinical psychologist Dr Goodhart recommends spreading three 10-minute activity sessions throughout the day, and making it part of your routine.

- **IF YOU HAVE ALEXA** shout 'open the Body Coach' to get a free HIIT session from fitness expert Joe Wicks, aka The Body Coach. If you have young children, join them for his free YouTube PE sessions at 9am on weekday mornings. If you're older, try one of his 'Workouts for Seniors', also on YouTube.

- **DOWNLOAD A FITNESS APP** such as 'Gymondo' (free); sportengland.org has activity advice and video classes for all age groups and abilities.

Facetime/Teams chats with other colleagues also working from home to mimic the interaction you would have in the office. 'This acts as vital cognitive respite and will also help to prevent feelings of loneliness and isolation.' She also suggests setting an alarm to remind you to get up, stretch and walk around the house for mental and physical wellbeing. 'Sit near a window when working if you can and leave the house for a walk at lunchtime if possible. The fresh air will limit the afternoon slump.'

HEALTHY HOUSEPLANTS

You can glean the health benefits of spending time in nature by bringing the outside in. Research suggests houseplants can help reduce stress levels, improve mood and filter polluted air, and studies show workers are more productive when their office is filled with greenery.

Hardy beginner's varieties for the not-very-green fingered include the spider plant, common English ivy (it lowers levels of airborne mould and calms allergies) and lavender (lowers stress and improves sleep). But topping the rankings is the Snake Plant (also known as mother-in-law's tongue or sansevieria) which has been shown to improve energy levels and clear toxins from the air. Patchplants.com has a wide range and deliver to your door. ■