

Has working from home given us all back ache?

DURING lockdown millions of us were suddenly forced to work from home for long hours every day for months at a time: smiling through endless Zoom meetings at the kitchen table, perching on the sofa to write reports — or sitting on a hard chair in a spare bedroom.

After all, how many of us who usually work in an office actually have an ergonomically designed chair at home?

These unfamiliar work stations inevitably put a strain on the body, and according to a recent survey by the Institute of Employment Studies, there has been a 'significant increase in musculoskeletal complaints' in lockdown. More than half of those surveyed reported new aches and pains: 58 per cent in the

By **LOUISE ATKINSON**

neck, 56 per cent in the shoulder, and 55 per cent in the back.

'The body is designed to move,' says physiotherapist Uzo Ehiogu, a teaching fellow at the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital in Birmingham. 'Pressure sensors around the body send signals to the brain to register discomfort and trigger the urge to move.'

However, he says, the sudden pressures of working from home and sitting in an unfamiliar seat means more of us are ignoring those signals and thereby storing up problems.

TACKLE NECK PAIN

'AT THE office you might have a comfortable chair, height-adjustable



Picture: SHUTTERSTOCK

screens, wrist supports, perhaps a telephone headset,' says Tim Allardyce, a physiotherapist and osteopath at Surrey Physio. 'Then suddenly you're glued to the sofa for hours on end, peering down in to a laptop.'

Tim says, as a result of this new working environment, he and his team are dealing with an increase in chronic neck pain (which he calls 'laptop neck').

Some people even work from bed — 'a terrible place to work,' he says. 'Even if you prop yourself up with pillows, sitting puts you at a 45-degree angle with your neck craned forward looking down at a screen.'

'This puts a significant amount of strain through your neck — your head weighs about 8kg and the muscles which support it are designed for rotational movements — not load carrying.'

So what is the best solution? 'Reduce the amount of time you spend leaning forwards over a laptop to a maximum of 15 minutes,' says Tim.

'Raise your laptop on a pile of books so you don't have to look down, and make a point of

continually moving around.' Perhaps the most frequently used 'home office' during lockdown has been sitting at the kitchen table.

But spending too long in this position can trigger tenderness in the upper trapezius muscles, which run from the neck to the shoulders.

Tim suggests that you try these three neck exercises ten to 15 times, two to three times a day:

■ **NECK retraction.** Gently draw your head and neck back and in, so they're upright, rather than bent forwards.

■ **ROTATE** your head, to the left, then to the right, to improve the range of movement.

■ **BEND** your head, taking your ear towards your shoulder on each side to mobilise a stiff neck and reduce pain.

SAVE YOUR SPINE

WORKING on a sofa or low chair can trigger problems in the lower back whether you find yourself propping a laptop on your knees or on a coffee table. 'Your spine naturally wants to be in an extended position with

your shoulders back and your bottom slightly sticking out, but a chair with no lumbar support can allow your spine to move into a "c-shape", which puts strain through the supporting muscles,' says Tim.

He says the key is to take every opportunity to change your sitting position.

In addition, use a cushion to support the lower back and 'try raising your laptop on a box so you can keep your spine straight rather than hunching, or spend part of your working day on a Swiss ball (usually used for exercise) which helps keep you upright'.

Tim also suggests three back exercises to try two or three times a day:

■ **LIE** flat on your back, with your arms stretched out to the sides, knees bent to 90 degrees, feet flat on the floor. Drop both legs to one side, knees together, then the other side — to improve mobility.

■ **RETURN** your legs to the starting position, and slowly lift your hips up into a 'bridge', then lower. This strengthens the core and lower back.

■ **LIE** on your front, one arm outstretched, and lift opposite arm and leg off the floor (the 'superman') to improve lower back stability and strength.

KEEP MOVING

TIM suggests getting into the habit of stopping work briefly every 30 minutes for a one to two-minute walk, even if it's just a stroll to another room, throughout the day.

'As long as you stay active, any mild pain or stiffness accumulated during lockdown should gradually ease over six to eight weeks without needing treatment,' agrees Uzo Ehiogu.



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5 OF THE BEST BACK PAIN GADGETS

BACK pain blights eight in ten Britons at some point. Here, Dr Serge Nikolic, a consultant in spinal pain management in London, selects five of the best products to treat and prevent it.

UPRIGHT GO 2
£84.99, uprightpose.uk

YOU stick this sensor on your upper spine and sync it with an app on your phone.

It will give you statistics on how much of the day you slouch, compared with sitting/standing upright. It also vibrates gently when you slouch, to remind you to sit up.

DOMYOS SOFT BALL
£3.99 decathlon.com

THIS low-cost Pilates ball is a firm favourite of physiother-

apists. Balancing on it isn't easy, so you engage your core muscles, such as your hip flexors, just by sitting on it. Going back to basics like this will optimise your posture, preventing future problems and helping with sciatica and other types of back pain.

PAINGONE TENS PEN
£29.95, tower-health.co.uk

TRANSCUTANEOUS electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) machines are small devices that emit tiny electrical pulses to interrupt pain signals going to the brain.

This pen-shaped device dispenses with pads, gels and electrodes, making it simpler to use. The maker says it will ease chronic and acute pain. It shouldn't be used if you're pregnant, have a pacemaker or epilepsy.

OMERIL UPGRADE POSTURE CORRECTOR

£10.99, amazon.co.uk

THIS is a Y-shaped adjustable brace you wear to pull your shoulders back, helping to align the spine and engage the supporting muscles, which get lazy with poor posture.

PELVIC CLOCK EXERCISE DEVICE

£83, amazon.co.uk

YOU place this semi-inflated plastic ball under your bottom while lying on the floor with your knees bent and do exercises to work the core muscles. Often people don't realise they have a weak core until back pain strikes.

ADRIAN MONTI

