FIRST AID FOR WORKING FROM HOME

In this guide:

- ✓ Tips to create your workspace
- ✓ Solutions to avoid the biggest pitfalls when working from home
- ✓ Advice from our experts on ergonomics, psychology and vitality

ArboNed

Recognise and remedy pitfalls

Working from home has lots of advantages. More freedom, higher productivity, and a better balance between work and private life. Less of the disturbances that an office environment or landscape brings, and no whining colleagues (or worse: managers) at your desk, no commuting, and of course: the pleasure of working in a familiar environment in a spot that you chose.

Usually, 5% of all workers in the Netherlands work from home. But these days, working from home has become the norm for the entire Dutch office population. It became compulsory overnight, and no-one knows yet how long this situation will last. It is now important also to watch out for the pitfalls of working from home, and to find clever ways to deal with them.

How do you deal with the new – temporary – reality of people massively working from home? And especially: how do you keep it healthy, pleasant and productive?
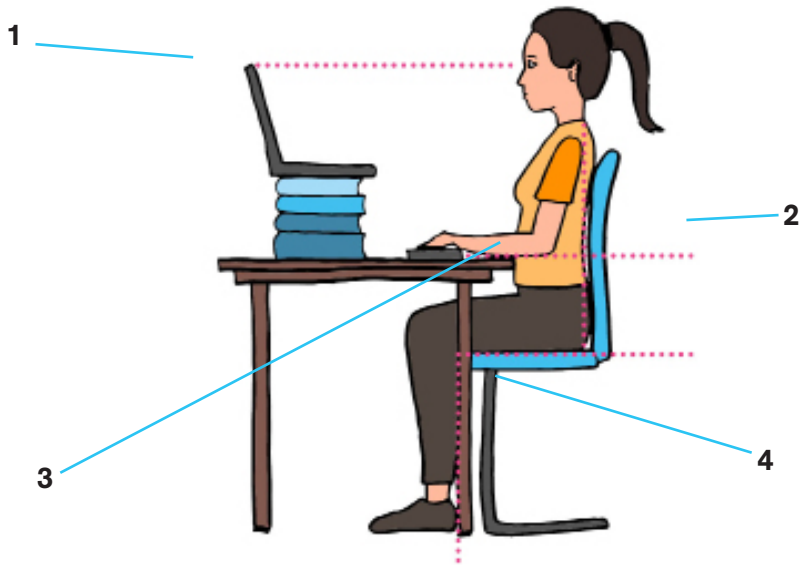
Quick:

Create your workspace

Even a home workspace with a laptop can be made as optimal as possible. Do it with an expert using our (home) workspace check (call 030 299 62 77 for more information) or follow the tips of our ergonomist Esther Graaff-Visser.
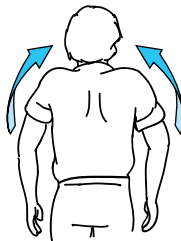
1. The top of the screen is just below eye level
2. The back is straight
3. The forearms are resting on the worktop
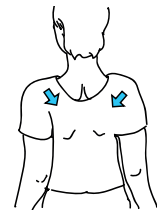4. Knees and elbows are at a 90° angle

Stretching exercises
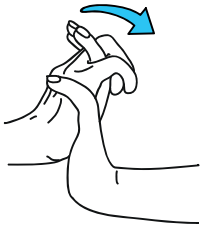
Arms and wrists
Always start with a wrist warm-up. Grip your fingers together and loosely rotate your wrists. Do this for about a minute.

Neck, back and shoulders
Pull your shoulders up while you breathe in. Drop your shoulders while breathing out.

Neck, back and shoulders
Sit up straight and pull your shoulders down and backwards.

Neck, back and shoulders
Fold your arms over each other, pull your elbows forward and round your back.
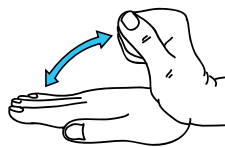
Arms and wrists
Put your forearm and hand flat on the table. Make a fist and tilt your hand upwards. Keep your forearm still. Now put your hand down flat again

Neck, back and shoulders
Sit up straight and turn your head as far as you can over your shoulder. Do this on both sides.

Tips for a good working posture

- Do you have an office space at home? Then make use of it as you would do at the office.
- Do you have an office chair at your dining table?
  - Adjust the armrests to provide a good, relaxed support for your arms.
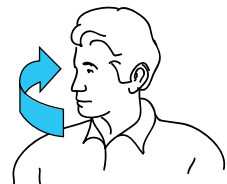 - Raise the seat so that the armrests are at the same height as the tabletop.
  - Put something underneath your feet to give your legs a horizontal support.
- If you don't have an office chair, try raising your chair in other ways. Aim for: forearms on the table, without having to pull up your shoulders.
- Push the keyboard away a bit so that your arms can rest properly on the table. Hold your back straight and avoid leaning forward.
- If you can, use a separate keyboard and screen. The top edge of the screen must be just below eye level. No separate screen? Then put the laptop on something high (for example a stack of books).
- Looking straight at daylight can be tiring. Preferably have the window behind or next to you.
- Get up every half hour and move: walk around (e.g. while talking on the phone) or do a few stretching exercises. You could also use a break software program like Workrave.
- Every half hour, go and sit with your laptop on a sofa or armchair. You could put a cushion under your elbows for support.
- If you have to be on the phone a lot, it will be more relaxing if your hands are free. Use earphones, a headset or the speaker function.

"At home, we often work on an ordinary chair, at a non-adjustable table, and with a laptop, which makes it more challenging to find the right working position. This could cause neck and shoulder problems. If you're working on a laptop at a too high kitchen table, you should see how you can prevent problems. Look for ways to sit better with the means at your disposal and … move!
Get up every half hour and move. Go and get a glass of water, a cup of coffee, walk while you're on the phone, do a few stretching exercises. Anything to loosen up your muscles."

Esther Graaff-Visser,
registered ergonomist at ArboNed

Approach your days like workdays

Normally it is obvious when your workday starts and ends. When you're working from home, the boundary is less clear. It is therefore important to set some boundaries yourself. To do this, it helps if you structure your day. How to structure:

- Get up at the usual time (perhaps subtract commuting time and give yourself an extra hour in bed).
- Follow your daily routine of taking a shower and getting dressed. It is tempting to hang around at home in pyjamas or a dressing gown, but the moment you get dressed for work, it puts you in a different mind frame. You become more focused, efficient and productive.
- If you don't have an office space at home, try as much as you can to arrange an area that you use for work only.
- Set limits for your family members too. For instance: a closed door means 'do not disturb'. Make clear arrangements with your partner regarding work hours, especially if you both also have to take care of the children.
- Get enough rest, and don't forget to have lunch. Working intensely and focused for too long at a stretch will make you less creative and productive, and could increase your chances of suffering from stress.
- Fix a clear beginning and end of your working day. Be clear about when you are present and available. Towards yourself, your colleagues and your supervisors.
- Go to bed at a reasonable time – as you would on a normal workday. This way you'll feel more rested when you start your next working day.

"When working from home, people tend to spend more hours on it over a larger part of the day. Even as much as two hours more a day on average. These two hours must come from somewhere: private time. Therefore, although working from home offers more autonomy and freedom, people generally tend to make insufficient use of this advantage.

A company doctor whom I consulted, had a nice way to deal with this. Every morning, after her usual routine, she put on her shoes and coat, and went 'to work'. She took this as far as going for a short morning walk of 15 or 20 minutes, and when she came back, she was 'at work'. During the day she also maintained her normal rhythm. Now and then a coffee break, phoning a colleague for a little chat, and not forgetting to take a moment of rest halfway through the day. Once she had worked up to the planned hour, she would turn off her computer, tidy up her work material, put her shoes back on, and walk out the door to 'go home'. In this way, she could literally leave work behind her. Once she got home, she would go into her living room, where there was no longer any work in sight, and where she could really be at home again."

Jan Machek,
psychologist at ArboNed

Set limits, avoid blurring

When the work sphere intrudes on the private sphere, it could lead to 'blurring'. The boundary between the two worlds starts to fade, leaving no more distance between the two. Your telephone and laptop will be lying next to you in the evening while you are watching TV, and each incoming message will get your immediate attention. If you take your laptop into your bedroom just to 'get a last few emails done', the boundary has definitely disappeared. Being continuously 'on' means you won't get any distance from work and the worries that go with it. Stress hormones will continue to be produced and could even disturb your sleep at night. For good mental health, it is important to avoid blurring.

What causes blurring?
One of the reasons for blurring is that working from home reduces the visible aspect of work. You are no longer physically present at work for 8 hours. This could feel liberating, because you can divide your time as you please, but there is a flip side to it. If you slap your laptop shut at 5 pm, there is no-one to see that you have really done a full day's work. Because you don't want to be seen as someone who cuts corners, there is the risk that you will tend to work longer hours. 'Better safe than sorry' seems to be the idea, probably fired by rumours of a nearing recession and rising unemployment.

The most important reason for this is the lack of visibility, and in particular, visibility of results. Often people don't agree clearly enough on these things, which means that employees will look for measurable ways to prove that they've been working hard and a lot. And the most obvious one is the time factor. Sometimes this will take extreme forms, where colleagues continue to call and email each other till late in the evening, putting the work-private-life balance under further pressure.

Define limits: prevent blurring

1. Where you work

To prevent blurring, it's important to define clear boundaries. Also in terms of WHERE you work. Make sure therefore that you don't take your work and everything that goes with it, into your 'safe place'. Or the place where you relax. If you take your laptop or phone to bed, you are bringing the work sphere into your bedroom. Eventually you will associate your bedroom or 'feel good' place with the stress that you experience from your work.

Find a place where you can work without being disturbed. Ideally you would have a room where you can close the door behind you at the end of your workday. But chances are you have to make do with less. In this case, define at least a corner in your room as your 'work corner'. Use the work corner for work only.

2. When you work

Your supervisors also have an important part to play in preventing blurring. Discuss with your supervisors what they expect from you in terms of availability and reachability. Agree on the hours during which you should be reachable, and the hours when you are working. Make sure that it is clear also when you are not working, and when the workday is over.

3. What you do

To make it clear and measurable that you are working hard – in ways other than putting a lot of time into it – agree on output. As it is often unclear what should have been done by the end of the day, many employees are left with the nagging question: "Have I done enough?" And at the shady side of this question lies the anxiety about falling short of the mark, with all the anxious thoughts about what the consequences could be. Therefore agree clearly with your supervisors on output and results. Make sure these goals are feasible, measurable and tangible.

Switch on and off
Have a structure Set your alarm clock, get dressed, and start your day. This not only gives a definite start to your day, you can also switch off once your work is done.

Set goals
Divide your work content into small, realistically reachable goals that you can tick off. Realise that you are not productive for eight hours on end when you're at work, so don't expect it at home either.

Draw limits
What is work time and what is private time.

For this, define a space in your home that is set aside for work. If you don't have a work room, simply create a corner. Work only there, so that you can also get away from it.

Take control
Be aware that you are the one who must regulate your workday, since the usual environment - the workshop - is absent for the moment. Therefore take control, so that you will not only work well, but also relax.

This will keep you productive

There is nothing more frustrating than having worked hard all day, and realising at the end of the day that you haven't actually made any progress. You might also feel guilty or anxious about it, because you do actually have a lot of work, but no overview and therefore no 'grip on the situation'. Use our psychologist Jan Machek's tips for productive days without the guilt.

Focus at work
A normal working day at the office rarely consists of 8 hours of non-stop, concentrated work. There are countless short interruptions and distractions. And this is exactly why you can remain reasonably focused and concentrated all day long.

The average person's concentration span is just over 20 minutes. These little interruptions normally give you a short break, after which you can once again focus and maintain your attention. It is also good for the hormone balance (in particular the production and breaking down of stress hormones).

Tips for a productive day working from home.
At home, there are usually few disturbances from outside. This means you end up spending hours at your computer. Here are some tips:

Define working hours
Agree clearly with your colleagues, supervisors and family when you can be contacted and when you are available for work.
Stick to your own agreements.

Focus briefly
Work for short, defined periods. You will be more efficient if you alternate short periods of focus, concentration and purposefulness with short periods when you relax.

Fix goals
Fix realistic, attainable goals. Then divide these goals into smaller sub-goals. For this, write out a clear to-do list.

Reward yourself
Reward yourself for reached goals: take a short break, chat with a family member or call a colleague, read a little article in a favourite magazine, or even have a biscuit with your cup of coffee or tea.
Ticking of attained goals will give you a feeling of control and satisfaction. And at the end of a workday, it's great to look back on what you've achieved.

Stay connected

One of the complaints one hears most often from people who work from home for long periods, is the lack of social contact and loss of connectedness. And even more so now, with everyone applying social distancing to contain the coronavirus. Some are even experiencing real social isolation. You might feel lonely and therefore experience emotional ailments like sadness or depression. And loneliness can make you feel less motivated and become less productive. It is important to stay connected and to use all communication means at your disposal.

Social support as a source of energy
Social support (from colleagues and supervisors) is an important source of energy at work. Social support comes from various things. It's the appreciation you get from a supervisor for 'a job well done', but also the help offered by a colleague when you're struggling with a tough challenge. And it's the sociable atmosphere that people experience at work. This source of energy is mostly lost when there is no longer any social interaction in the workplace.

Keep in touch digitally
New technologies can solve a lot. Many departments nowadays work with Teams, Hangouts, Zoom or other applications. And in private life, video calls with family members have become fairly common. Although the latest technology cannot replace personal contact,
it's a big improvement on the radio silence that would have befallen previous generations in a similar situation. Use these communication means and stay connected.

Tips for staying connected

- If it's something you enjoy, you can arrange with your supervisors to have a daily (video) call (or two, at the start and the end of the day). Use it as an update and to clear up what needs to be done or has happened.
- Use group video calls for meetings. But watch out: a video meeting with a large group can quickly become chaotic. Agree on the agenda, don't make the discussion too long, and if one speaker needs to talk for longer, arrange for the others to go on 'mute'. Let others say what they have to say, and get rid of superfluous silences.
- After joint meetings, make sub-groups of two or three people who can stay in contact via video in the following working hours.
- Create a WhatsApp group with your team or department. Keep each other updated on developments, but also share personal experiences and make contact like you would do at the workplace. If you're the comic relief of the department, feel free to continue joking on WhatsApp. If there is need for it, there can be a separate group for work-related information, and another for 'social' messages.
- Keep communication on a positive note. It's nice to get appreciation, compliments and encouragement, and it's perhaps even easier to give (and to receive) it through a WhatsApp or work-related chat, than in person. Appreciate each other for their input. This is a stressful time, with gloomy news reports and worries about everything that the virus might do. It is therefore all the more important to avoid a feeling of isolation.
- Know that your colleagues are in the same boat. If you are feeling gloomy or lonely, chances are that they are too. Help yourself and others by maintaining contact and interest in one another. Call each other, send a message, and let people know that you are there for one another.
- Continue celebrating colleagues' birthdays, and make room in the agenda for shared coffee or lunch breaks.

MyCoachLine for mental pressure

As a result of the coronavirus, you might be experiencing extra mental pressure. For example due to an imbalance between work and private life, gloominess because of insufficient social contact, or extra worries about your own or friends' and family members' health. For this, there is now MyCoachLine, exclusively for ArboNed clients' employees.

Focus on a healthy life style

Exercise and healthy food are of course essential for enjoying life, but with the coronavirus, it is even more important to stay in shape. With these tips from our vitality and health expert, you can keep moving and eat healthily while you're working from home.

The positive effect of healthy food
Eating healthy food has a positive effect on both your physical and mental health.
Healthy food:

- ✓ Helps to reduce the risk of certain diseases (type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, certain forms of cancer).
- ✓ Strengthens your immune system and therefore lowers the chances of infection.
- ✓ Gives you more energy and a feeling of fitness.
- ✓ Boosts your performance.
- ✓ Helps to keep your weight in check.
- ✓ Helps you deal better with stress.
- ✓ Improves your sleep.

Yet it can be a bother to keep eating healthy food when you're working from home, or perhaps if due to the coronavirus, you may not be working while others can continue to do so. Try out a nice new recipe, stay a bit longer in the kitchen to prepare fresh food for your meals. For this, you could perhaps use the time that you would normally need to commute to and from work. These foods are good for your immune system:

Fruit	Vegetables	Nuts	Other
Oranges	Broccoli	Almonds	Sweet potato
Pineapple	Spinach	Walnuts	Garlic
Strawberries	Cabbage	Hazelnuts	Low-fat yoghurt
Grapefruit	Carrots		Oysters
Kiwi	Beetroot		Wheat germs
Guava	Mushrooms		Ginger
Tomatoes			Green tea
Lemon			
Elderberries			
Watermelon			

And here are some healthy snacks:

- A handful of untoasted, unsalted nuts
- A whole-wheat cracker with a healthy topping like hummus
- Fresh fruit
- Dried fruit
- A bowl of cottage cheese
- Snack vegetables
- A hard-boiled egg

GET MOVING

A 'lunchtime walk' from home

Walking with colleagues over lunch, cycling to the office, and walking up the stairs to your workplace. Not everyone can do these during the corona crisis. While exercise is so important! It reduces the risk of chronic illnesses like diabetes, cardiovascular disorders and depression.

It is recommended to do moderately intense exercise five times a week for half an hour, plus muscle-strengthening exercises twice a week. Moderately intense exercise can very well be done when working from home. Go cycling or take a walk, but at quiet times and keeping a sufficient distance between each other. For muscle-strengthening exercise, use your creativity. A 5kg kettle bell or medicine ball is for instance the equivalent of a bag of sand, potting soil or potatoes. You can find many home workouts on line.

'Besides being a vitality and health expert, I'm also a boot-camp trainer. At the moment we can't train together, so I'm giving exercises that anyone can do at home. And there are many other creative solutions too. For example, use a heavy stone or tile from the garden as a weight. But be careful, you don't want any injuries to happen. Do you still have a skipping rope or hula hoop from earlier or of your children lying around? These are excellent for a good workout. Garden furniture is also great to use for various exercises that strengthen the thigh muscles. Like squats: bend your knees till you're almost sitting on the garden chair. Or walk through the garden with a deep lunge step."

Mike Broxterman,
senior vitality and health expert at ArboNed