

Back and Spine care during Covid

Back and neck pain combined are the leading cause of disability worldwide. We are living amidst a pandemic, and this has added to our existing troubles regarding upkeep of spine health. Most of our health-care advisors who commonly used to treat patients with spine issues are unable to do so now. In most areas, the medical specialists have been forced to narrow down their treatment to emergency or critical patients.

Being mindful about the harmful impact of Covid, we can witness a rising trend of people “working from home”. This reduces the direct contact with people, and thus curbs the outspread of virus. However, the spinal pain and disorders have not gone away. With this shifted workspace people are experiencing back and neck pain, and are having trouble coping up with discomfort, disability, and disruption of routine that these conditions caused. With the dynamics of workspace being changed drastically, one needs to pay more attention to their health and posture. In this new normal Covid times people are just working sitting anywhere from home, be it dining table or keeping the laptop literally on the lap or even sitting on the bed. Now, this calls for serious attention on how one’s posture need to be kept.

Apart from these work related spinal issues, the older generation, which either already had spinal problems or were susceptible to them, have been hit the hardest. On one hand being confined to home has decreased their level of exercise so important for back integrity, and on the other hand due to fear of infection, they have not been able to go to the hospital and seek medical help. This double whammy has increased the disabilities due to spinal problems in many elderly patients.

As specialists in orthopaedics, we wish to serve our community during this pandemic by generating awareness about the ways one can look after one's spine health by staying indoors.

Work space Ergonomics

Every person spends most of the time of his day at work. So, it is *essential* to learn about the methods to refrain from committing mistakes that hurt or pain the back during long hours of work. The major aim of ergonomics is to make work life more comfortable, and to help enhance both health and productivity

- **What is the significance of work space ergonomics?**

This pandemic has brought drastic changes to our life. We tried and changed to adapt to this new normal which we thought to be a short-term situation. Now, as we can foresee this to last months, and thus we need to incorporate certain infrastructural changes to avoid the surfacing back and neck pain. Excess stress, reduced focus on healthy eating and lack of physical activity has given way to back and neck pain – which is becoming common for almost everyone working from home.

- **What precautions one must stick to?**

Standing work stations

Standing work station is also the in-thing now-a-days wherein you can always be mobile after a while; you can always divide your time between sitting and standing. Few things you need to keep in mind are:

- Keep your laptop at eye level, no need to invest on your new furniture – instead keep some books underneath your laptop to match your eye level.

- If you are standing and working, make sure not to lean on the table or put much weight on the counter top.
- For those using laptops, external keyboard and mouse are few investments you can make and will not regret.

(<https://youtu.be/DIPth9IZaaw>)

Organisation of work stations

Simply setting up the computer work station can reduce the stresses associated with repetitive motion and prolonged sitting posture. Simple adjustments in seat height, monitor height and keyboard and mouse changes can bring your joints and muscles in the most neutral position of comfort. This ‘neutral’ position of comfort prevents many spinal and musculoskeletal disorders.

- Your knees should be level or slightly lower than your hips
- The monitor should be at eye-level or slightly lowered
- Neutral wrist position should be maintained when fingers are on the keyboard or on the mouse
- Your forearms should be parallel to the floor
- Sit upright, with proper lumbar support

Tips to be kept in mind

Here are some of the tips to be kept in mind while working from home:

1. **Stretch:** Stretching opens up your muscles and improves posture. This is one basic rule while working from home – you must always keep stretching your neck and spine at regular intervals. Though these are specific to each patient, yet one should include some stretching exercises in your daily workout.
2. **Keep your screen at eye level:** For all those working on laptops or screens; bending or lowering your back to look at

your screen can cause serious damage to your neck. So, you must position the chair so that the screen is at your eye-level to avoid a slouchy back issue.

3. **Refrain from staying in bed for long:** During the times of pain, bed feels comforting. But little do you know, this only does more harm than good. Prolonged bed rest can amount to loss of about 1% of muscle strength each day. So, the sooner you start moving, the faster you may improve.
4. **Indulge in healthy eating:** Some foods to abstain from eating include sugary drinks, processed snacks, high-fat dairy products, fried food. Incorporate healthy foods like fruits and vegetables, beans and legumes, healthy fats, lean poultry and fish.
5. **Improve your posture:**
 - Always sit or stand with your back straight.
 - Keep both your legs on the floor at all the times. This can help straighten up and practice the right posture as you sit throughout the day.
 - Switch sitting positions often and periodically.
 - Place a pillow or rolled-up towel behind the lower back while sitting.

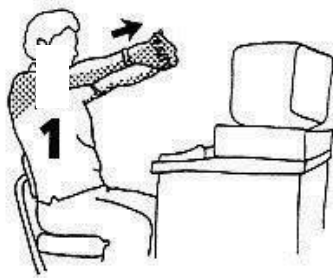
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STRETCHING AT WORK PLACE

When stretching, do not bounce.

When you feel mild to moderate tension, don't stretch any further.

Hold each stretch for 15-30 seconds



10-20 seconds
2 times



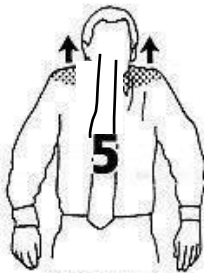
10-15 seconds



8-10 seconds
each side



15-20 seconds



3-5 seconds
3 times



10-12 seconds
each arm



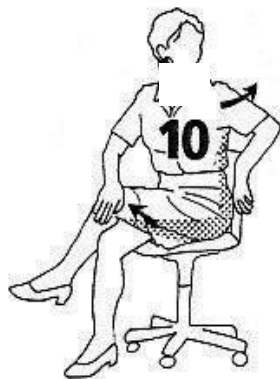
10 seconds



10 seconds



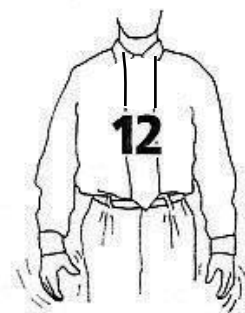
8-10 seconds
each side



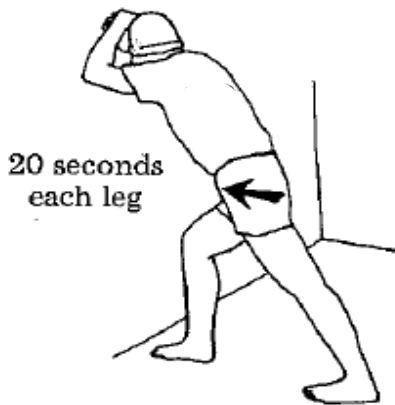
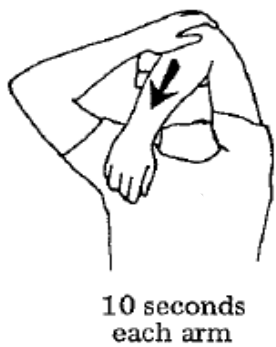
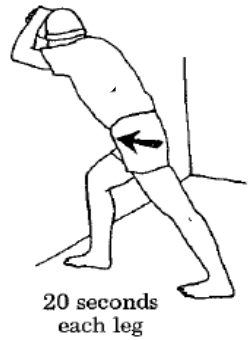
8-10 seconds
each side



10-15 seconds
2 times



Shake out hands
8-10 seconds



Stretching increases flexibility: Flexible muscles can improve your daily performance. Tasks such as lifting packages, bending to tie your shoes become easier and less tiring.

Stretching improves range of motion of your joints: Good range of motion keeps you in better balance, which will help keep you mobile and less prone to falls and the related injuries, especially as you age.

Stretching improves circulation: Stretching increases blood flow to your muscles. Improved circulation can speed recovery after muscle injuries.

Stretching can relieve stress: Stretching relaxes the tense muscles that often accompany stress.

Mental health and back problems in Covid

As per WHO, the COVID-19 pandemic means that many of us are staying at home and doing less in terms of social interactions and exercise. This can have a negative effect on both your physical, spinal and mental health. (www.who.int)

The new realities of working from home, temporary unemployment, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues take time to get used to. Adapting to lifestyle changes such as these, and managing the fear of contracting the virus and worry about people close to us who are particularly vulnerable, are challenging for all of us. They can be particularly difficult for people with mental health conditions.

Fortunately, there are lots of things that we can do to look after our own mental health and to help others who may need some extra support and care.

Here are tips and advice that we hope you will find useful.

- **Keep informed.** Listen to advice and recommendations from your national and local authorities. Follow only trusted news channels, such as local and national TV and radio, and keep up-to-date with the latest news on Covid guidelines.

- **Have a routine.** Keep up with daily routines as far as possible, or make new ones to suit you keeping in mind the following suggestions:
 - Get up and go to bed at similar times every day.
 - Keep up with personal hygiene.
 - Eat healthy meals at regular times.
 - Exercise regularly.
 - Allocate time for working and time for resting.
 - Make time for doing things you enjoy.
- **Minimize newsfeeds.** Try to reduce how much you watch, read or listen to news that makes you feel anxious or distressed. Seek the latest information at specific times of the day, once or twice a day if needed.
- **Social contact is important.** If your movements are restricted, keep in regular contact with people close to you by telephone and online channels.
- **Alcohol and drug use.** Limit the amount of alcohol you drink or don't drink alcohol at all. Don't start drinking alcohol if you have not drunk alcohol before. Avoid using alcohol and drugs as a way of dealing with fear, anxiety, boredom and social isolation. There is no evidence of any protective effect of drinking alcohol for viral or other infections. In fact, the opposite is true as the harmful use of alcohol is associated with increased risk of infections and worse treatment outcomes. Be aware that alcohol and drug use may prevent you from taking sufficient precautions to protect yourself against infection, such as compliance with hand hygiene.
- **Screen time.** Be aware of how much time you spend in front of a screen every day. Make sure that you take regular breaks from on-screen activities.
- **Video games.** While video games can be a way to relax, it can be tempting to spend much more time on them than usual when at home for long periods. Be sure to keep the right balance with off-line activities in your daily routine.

- **Social media.** Use your social media accounts to promote positive and hopeful stories. Correct misinformation wherever you see it.
- **Help others.** If you are able to, offer support to people in your community who may need it, such as helping them with food shopping or online. This act of service for others can boost your self esteem and give a sense of productivity.
- **Positive psychology.** Take opportunities to think positively and express gratitude, practice mindfulness, resilience and other positive psychological techniques. Use the good online resources on positive psychology to keep your mind strong and engaged in constructive activities with your family or close community. Be thankful to all essential services and health-care workers helping us all to respond to COVID-19.

About the author

Dr. Shishir Kumar, senior spine surgeon, is currently heading the department of spine surgery at Metro Hospitals group in **Delhi** and **Noida, India**. He has more than 14 years of experience in spine surgery and headed the largest Spinal Cord Injury Centre in Asia at Military Hospital at Kirkee, Pune. He is a graduate and post-graduate from the prestigious Armed Forces Medical College, Pune. He actively contributed in introducing minimally invasive spine surgery, scoliosis and advanced deformity correction surgery into the armed forces. He has always pushed boundaries and his vision is to make all his patients *get back to freedom* and walk the same day or day after surgery. Earlier, spinal cord surgery was misunderstood by many claiming that it causes more pain than it helps or only a few people would recover and benefit from it. But now, with advanced techniques and skilled experienced surgeons, **safe spine surgery** is available for all those who are suffering from treatable spine diseases.