



Working From Home Is a Pain in The Neck—and Back

Blame it on weeks of working from our sofas

BY AARON ZITNER

For Anthony Flint, one of the most comfortable spots in his house became one of the most dangerous.

With his company office closed by the coronavirus pandemic, Mr. Flint took to working in a brown armchair in his bedroom, his legs sharing the ottoman with his terrier, Dusty. Then came the backache.

"It got so bad that I was in the kitchen making dinner and I found myself hanging on to the counter trying to take weight off my legs,"

he says.

With millions of Americans now working from home, many are finding that they haven't nailed the basics, ergonomically speaking. They are slumping on the couch with laptops, then slumping again to watch TV. They're sitting on beds, necks strained from staring down at cellphones. Many have ignored widely available tipsheets on how to set up workstations at home.

The result: Weeks of poor posture have led to backaches, neck pain and headaches, say physical therapists and other practitioners who are fielding more complaints.

When the American Chiropractic Association posted a survey on its Facebook page recently, nearly 200 members, or 90% of those who answered, said their patients were experiencing more pain since stay-at-

Settle into a comfy chair for a Zoom meeting, says Anthony Flint, and 'it turns out you are laying waste to your spine.'

home rules went into effect. The North American Spine Society, an association of physicians, reports that exercises to reduce neck pain were the second most viewed item in April on its website for patients, up from fifth a year ago.

"I was getting phone calls from people saying, 'I can't move my neck,'" says Karen Erickson, a New York City chiropractor. "And within 15 minutes of doing a health history, I realized that these people were working at home, often using their coffee table as a desk or sitting on their sofa." Setups like that can easily put the neck and back in stressful positions.

The pain sets in

At consulting firm Performance Based Ergonomics, which provides online and in-person ergonomic training, client surveys found that the main challenge for workers changed during the shelter-at-home period. For many, the first weeks focused on finding a good place to work.

"We were hearing, 'I'm working in my beanbag chair.' 'I'm sitting on the floor on a yoga mat,'" says Vivienne Fleischer, president of the San Francisco Bay Area-based company. "I have roommates in my apartment, and the only way to get privacy is to sit on my bed."

Later, the challenge became finding a way to work without pain. "Clients who initially said 'We're good' are calling and saying, 'I've got 15 people with neck problems and back problems,'" Ms. Fleischer says. "The longer we're in this, the worse it's getting."

Compounding the problem, health providers say, is that life has become more sedentary for many people. Muscles are straining for longer periods without the interruption of a commute to work or a hop around the corner for lunch.

Bad choices

Home offers a range of bad options for workspaces. Two of the biggest culprits in causing pain: Beds and sofas, especially those with deep seating and soft cushions.

Both offer little chance for solid back support, leaving the shoulders rounding forward. Sitting with the legs extended can also stress the back.

"It's just diabolical," says Mr. Flint, a senior fellow at a land-use-planning think tank outside of Boston. "You think you are getting all comfortable by sitting in a comfy chair, putting the laptop on a pillow and your legs on an ottoman. But then after sitting that way through a 90-minute Zoom meeting, it turns out you are laying waste to your spine." He says that his aches paled in comparison to the damage the coronavirus has caused for many people, but that

the pain radiating down his leg was serious enough to prompt him to set up a telephone consult with a physical therapist specializing in spinal issues.

Cellphones are another hazard. A person's head, which typically weighs about 12 pounds, can put strain on the neck equal to 60 pounds when angled down to look at a phone screen, says Dr. Scott Bautch, a chiropractor in Wausau, Wis.

Extended cellphone and laptop use are bringing more patients into his practice, including more students. "The time that a kid is on the phone trying to interact with other kids is elongated now," he says. "So, that postural stress builds up more and more."

Looking down

Makayla Nelson, a high-school senior in Sinai, S.D., had finished basketball season and was preparing for track practice to start when schools closed. Rather than moving among classrooms all day and throwing a shot put after school, she began to spend long hours at home with her laptop, sitting in a recliner or on her bed with her legs sometimes outstretched. After a while she developed neck pain and headaches.

"My neck is always looking down at my screen, whereas normally in class I'll be looking up," she says. "I was in sports a lot, so I would have a lot of activity." Now, she says, exercise is mostly a walk every other day.

A visit to a chiropractor helped, says her mother, Kristy Nelson, but it has been a challenge to change habits.

Maria Bonta de la Pezuela, chief executive for the Americas at a New York art gallery, also says changing



For Makayla Nelson, long stretches with her laptop in a recliner or on her bed led to neck pain.

habits was hard. She saw a chiropractor, Dr. Erickson, after working at home left her with neck and shoulder pain. At home, she knows that her laptop screen should be placed higher and that she should use a detachable keyboard. But has she changed her workspace?

"That's the \$64 million question," she said. "You'd think that since I consider myself somewhat intelligent, the answer should be yes." While she was stretching more often in the morning before work, she hadn't yet bought the new keyboard.

"Maybe after this call, I'll do that," she said.

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Cooking in Quarantine: Cashew Chicken

TOTAL TIME: 30 minutes
SERVES: 4

- ½ cup cashews
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- ¾ teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 2 boneless skinless chicken breasts (about 12 ounces), cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 tablespoons rice vinegar or other white vinegar
- 3 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons sesame oil
- ¼ teaspoon sugar
- 1-inch piece ginger, grated
- 2 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- ¼ cup neutral oil such as grapeseed oil or canola
- ½ medium onion, sliced into ½-inch wedges
- 1 scallion, optional, thinly sliced on the diagonal
- Toasted sesame seeds, for serving (optional)
- Crushed red pepper flakes (optional)
- Lime wedges, for serving (optional)
- Cooked rice, or serving (optional)

This cashew chicken nods nostalgically to the Chinese-American takeout classic, and you can get it on the table in half the time it would take to have it delivered. For a vegetarian version, swap in baked tofu or tempeh for the chicken. Whether or not you opt for a meatless version, vegetables with some bite—think string beans, broccoli florets or celery slices—make a welcome addition to the dish. Toss them in at the end along with the chicken or other protein and let the vegetables cook, undisturbed, just until they char slightly. The recipe moves quickly so make sure all the ingredients are lined up and ready to go by the stove.

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Spread cashews out on a baking sheet and toast until lightly golden, about 9 minutes. Meanwhile, in a large bowl, whisk together flour, salt, black pepper and 1 teaspoon cornstarch. Pat chicken dry with paper towels, add to flour mixture and toss to coat. Set aside.

2. In a medium bowl, whisk together remaining cornstarch, rice vinegar, soy sauce, sesame oil, sugar and ginger. In a large nonstick skillet, heat oil over medium-high heat. Remove chicken from bowl, shaking off excess flour, and add to skillet. Cook chicken, undisturbed, until lightly browned, 4-5 minutes. Flip chicken and continue to cook until lightly browned on other side, about 2 minutes. Transfer chicken to a plate and turn off heat. Leave oil in pan let cool slightly, about 2 minutes.

3. Set heat under pan to medium. Add onions and cook, undisturbed, until lightly charred and crisp at edges, about 4 minutes. Flip and cook 2 minutes more. Add garlic and cook, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add cashews and chicken, tossing to combine. Whisk sauce once more, making sure ingredients are well-combined and there are no lumps. Pour sauce all over chicken and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low to maintain a simmer, and continue to cook until sauce has thickened and reduced slightly, 3-4 minutes.

4. Top with sliced scallions and sesame seeds. For added heat, sprinkle on crushed red pepper flakes. Serve with lime wedges and cooked rice, if you like.

—Eleanore Park

