

Study: Employers should adopt remote working policies to target staff activity, stress and diet

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Companies considering remote working in the post-pandemic world need to introduce measures to increase physical activity, reduce stress

and improve diet for employees, a new study has recommended.

Academics at the University of Derby assessed the habits of 184 workers who had begun working remotely during the first UK lockdown in 2020 to measure the impact of the change to their lives.

The team surveyed participants' living and working conditions to study the relationship between physical and psychosocial [wellbeing](#) and productivity under lockdown conditions, and examined how factors such as gender, employer support and parental duties affected their situation.

Compared to their pre-pandemic levels of activity, 70 percent of participants reported having a more [sedentary lifestyle](#) and around a third increased their food and alcohol intake during lockdown.

In addition, two-thirds found consuming news about the virus psychologically distressing.

These factors contributed to a deterioration in [mental health](#) and how effective employees were in their jobs, according to the study, titled "Influence of the COVID-19 lockdown on remote workers' physical and psychosocial wellbeing and [work productivity](#)."

Dr. Fabio Parente, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University's School of Psychology, said: "The restrictions brought in by government to control the spread of COVID-19 were necessary to save lives and protect the NHS from being overwhelmed. However, this profound change to their working lives has had a marked negative impact upon people's mental health and their ability to do their job.

"It is well known that a more sedentary lifestyle leads to a decline in mental health which, in turn, reduces productivity. As people started working from home, they ate more, drank more and spent more time

sitting. Additionally, consumption of distressing COVID-19 news may have further affected both their physical and psychological wellbeing."

There were some positive findings, however, with around half of those surveyed engaging in more vigorous exercise than prior to the lockdown.

Fabio added: "Some of our findings suggest that [remote work](#) can have positive consequences, such as reducing commuting expenses and a greater sense of agency and independence. This tells us that remote working can become a viable employment model for many, provided this transition is adequately supported both by governments and employers."

More women engaged in [recreational activities](#), such as baking and arts and crafts, than men in order to maintain their wellbeing, but they were also significantly more likely to be the main childcare provider in the household while schools were also closed.

Dr. Yessica Abigail Tronco Hernández, of the University of Plymouth, who collaborated on the project, explained: "What our findings tell us is that an individual's ability to maintain a healthy diet, physical activity and good mental health will very likely have been impacted by suddenly transitioning to remote working.

"If companies are likely to require a greater proportion of their workforce to work remotely in the future to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 or as a contingency for future pandemics, then strategies to promote a more sustainable way of working are required.

"In particular, policies that promote [physical activity](#), reduce psychological distress, address gender gaps, and support balancing childcare and home schooling while remote working are needed.

"It is also essential that employers monitor workers' wellbeing and implement systemic guidelines and practices to maintain it at as high a level as possible.

"This could include encouraging physically active breaks at work while also promoting individual lifestyle changes outside of the workplace, such as meditation or healthy cooking.

"Reasonable adjustments in the 'new' workplace arrangements and clear productivity expectations are important considerations for employers too.

"Targeted strategies such as these to support people working remotely as a consequence of COVID-19, as well as access to wellbeing research, may help to thwart, or at least attenuate, an international public health crisis on top of the one the pandemic has created."

More information: Yessica Abigail Tronco Hernandez et al, Influence of the COVID-19 lockdown on remote workers' physical and psychosocial wellbeing and work productivity, (2021). [DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/dnuk3](https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/dnuk3)

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