Guideline for Working from Home in Return-to-Work Trajectories

Thanks to developments in the field of remote work in recent years, it is increasingly possible to (partially) work from home. Often, working from home is even considered as the first step in a return-to-work process following prolonged sickness absence.

However, the decision to work from home must be made responsibly. Regardless of whether the employee has previously worked from home or not, it should be systematically assessed whether remote work would be a suitable and healthy approach in the initial phase of the return-to-work process. This guideline for working from home can assist in making that systematic assessment.

Important: when the guideline indicates that it may be unwise to start working from home, that does not mean the employee is ready to start working in the office. When the guideline indicates it may be wiser to start working from the office this could also refer to a later point in time. For a start in the office it is of course also important to create a suitable work environment.

For more information and instructional videos about this guideline, please visit https://www.ru.nl/en/research/research-projects/rest-recover-and-work-from-home

ZonMw Radboud University

This guideline has been developed by scientists from the Work, Health & Performance research group at Radboud University (Liz Beekman, MSc, Dr. Brigitte Claessens, Dr. Yannick Griep, Prof. Dr. Debby Beckers, and Prof. Dr. Cécile Boot), in collaboration with: UWV, Arbo Unie, Human Total Care, postgraduate training for occupational physicians (SGBO), Dutch Association for Occupational and Environmental Medicine (NVAB), Labor Expertise Center (AKC), Dutch Association of Labor Experts (NVvA), and the Specialist Case Management Register (RSC). If you have any questions about the application or development of the guideline, you can contact Liz Beekman (liz.beekman@ru.nl).

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Preliminary conditions for working from home in return-to-work

Can you answer 'yes' to each of the following questions?

- Do you have tasks that can be carried out from home?
- Can you create a suitable workspace at home?
- Are you able to carry out tasks at home undisturbed?

No — If one or more of the questions are answered with no, working from home is not advisable. When these conditions are met in the future, you can reconsider working from home

Yes — Navigate through the decision tree below to determine if working from home could be a suitable initial step in the return-to-work process.

You can go through this decision tree on your own or with your supervisor, case manager or occupational physician.
We recommend going through the decision tree with your case manager or occupational physician at least once every 6 weeks.

Start Here

Do you derive a sense of accomplishment from the tasks you could perform at home?

- No → Would the tasks you can perform at the office give you a sense of accomplishment?
  - Yes → Are you able to carry out tasks undisturbed at the office?
    - Yes → Starting the return-to-work process at the office may be a better option. If anything changes in your circumstances, we recommend revisiting the guideline.
    - No → It seems that you see no opportunities for a calm start at returning to work both at home and in the office. We advise you to discuss this with your supervisor and/or occupational physician.
  - No → Can your supervisor or case-manager support you in setting limits on working hours while you are working from home?
    - No → Starting the return-to-work process at the office may be a better option. If anything changes in your circumstances, we recommend revisiting the guideline.
    - Yes → Do you still experience this support when working from home?
      - No → Starting the return-to-work process at the office may be a better option. If anything changes in your circumstances, we recommend revisiting the guideline.
      - Yes → Does your commute to work typically drain a lot of your energy?
        - No → Both starting the return to work from home and doing so at the office are viable options. We recommend starting at the office as soon as possible, but if you find this step to be too quick, beginning from home is also a good option. If you choose to work from home, please consider the general advice on starting the return to work from home on the next page of this guideline.
        - Yes → Do you feel fatigued by the time you arrive at the office?
          - No → Both starting the return to work from home and doing so at the office are viable options. We recommend starting at the office as soon as possible, but if you find this step to be too quick, beginning from home is also a good option. If you choose to work from home, please consider the general advice on starting the return to work from home on the next page of this guideline.
          - Yes → Starting the return-to-work trajectory from home is a good option. However, please consider the general advice on on starting the return to work from home on the next page of this guideline.
- Yes → Are you able to set limits on your working hours from home by yourself?
  - Yes → How do you currently experience social contact with colleagues at the office?
    - Supportive → Do you currently feel the need for this support?
      - Yes → Do you still experience this support when working from home?
        - No → Starting the return-to-work process at the office may be a better option. If anything changes in your circumstances, we recommend revisiting the guideline.
        - Yes → Does your commute to work typically drain a lot of your energy?
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          - Yes → Starting the return-to-work trajectory from home is a good option. However, please consider the general advice on on starting the return to work from home on the next page of this guideline.
    - Taxing → Starting the return-to-work trajectory from home is a good option. However, please consider the general advice on on starting the return to work from home on the next page of this guideline.
- No → Can your supervisor or case-manager support you in setting limits on working hours while you are working from home?
  - No → Starting the return-to-work process at the office may be a better option. If anything changes in your circumstances, we recommend revisiting the guideline.
  - Yes → Do you still experience this support when working from home?
    - No → Starting the return-to-work process at the office may be a better option. If anything changes in your circumstances, we recommend revisiting the guideline.
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        - Yes → Starting the return-to-work trajectory from home is a good option. However, please consider the general advice on on starting the return to work from home on the next page of this guideline.

The outcome of this decision tree is advisory and **not binding**. Consider this decision tree as a starting point for a conversation about possibilities.

Things to keep in mind for...

The employee

- When you resume working from home, it's important to **use your energy efficiently** for your job. **Be cautious of tasks unrelated to your work** that may drain your energy during working hours (e.g., taking care of children).
- Ensure to take **timely breaks** and use them to **relax, eat healthily, and engage in enough physical activity**, especially if you are less active when not in the office.
- Make sure your **home workspace is well-designed to prevent physical discomfort** due to your working posture. You can discuss this with your occupational physician.
- Set **limits on the amount of time you dedicate to work** and work-related communication. Let others know when you are available for work meetings and when you are not working.

The supervisor

- When employees work from home, they are often less visible. Especially in reintegration processes during sickness absence, it's crucial for the employee to feel sufficiently supported. Therefore, establish **regular meetings** to maintain communication.
- Make **clear agreements** regarding **working hours** and the **expected work products.**
- Coordinate with your employee regarding **availability and boundaries for work-related communication**. Communicate these agreements with other employees and colleagues collaborating with the individual.
- Ensure that, even remotely, you express **acknowledgment and appreciation** for your employee's work.
- Discuss possibilities within your organization to **support the physical and mental health** of the employee.

The case-manager/occupational physician*

- Discuss possibilities within your organization to **support the physical and mental health** of the employee.
- Discuss with the employee and supervisor how the **workspace** can be **ergonomically sound**.*
- It remains crucial, especially during remote work, to **protect employees from overworking**. Therefore, **establish clear agreements on workload** with the employee and the supervisor.
- Use the factors from the guideline to **assess potential risks for the employee** and discuss them. Consider aspects such as social support, work-life balance, structure, etc.

The outcome of the guideline may change over time.
Therefore, **revisit the guideline frequently enough (at least every 6 weeks)** to reassess.

*In many organisations, the occupational physician collaborates with a case manager and specialists (such as ergonomists, for example). The occupational physician is ultimately responsible for assessing the employee's fitness for work. The distribution of the mentioned support tasks can be allocated among the counselors involved in the employee's return-to-work trajectory.