

# TELEWORKING AND *BACKPAIN*

The lockdown implemented on March 17, 2020 led to changes in the organization of work, including the massive deployment of teleworking. A study published on October 9, 2020 in the french review «Santé publique France» measured **the effects of the change in work organization linked to the lockdown on the occurrence and evolution of low back pain<sup>(1)</sup>**. 3224 active people were asked about their working situation during the lockdown and their lower back symptoms (muscle soreness, pains, discomfort), before and after the lockdown.

Among workers who did not suffer from low back pain before the lockdown (2,113 people), 10.4% had developed one after the lockdown.

That proportion varied according to the work situation, with a rate of 16% among those who had started teleworking due to the lockdown. Moreover, people who suffered from anxiety and those who had cramped or promiscuous accommodation also had a **significantly increased risk** of developing low back pain during the lockdown, in similar work situations, compared to those who were not.



# MORE SPECIFICALLY...

Among workers who suffered from low back pain before the implementation of the lockdown (1,111 people), the majority reported that their low back problems were unchanged.



That study showed that people who were used to teleworking were less likely to develop low back pain than those who were suddenly and involuntarily installed in teleworking. Despite the existing guides on good workstation ergonomics, it is not always easy for workers to get to that information and to set up their workstation ergonomically at home (working on a laptop, no office...).

Thus, 43% of teleworkers from a sample of private sector employees declaring that teleworking during the lockdown had a negative impact on their physical health reported that their working postures had deteriorated during the lockdown.

In addition, the results of that study showed an association between cramped or promiscuous accommodation and the incidence of low back pain, and they tend to confirm the intrication between a person's psychological state and the occurrence of low back pain.

## A LIVE CONFERENCE<sup>(2)</sup> LED BY CHRISTIAN GAGNIÈRE,

Medical and Scientific Director at LPG Systems and entitled «Telework, back pain and physical risks: contribution of physiotherapy» was organized on November 26, 2020 to review the subject with 3 experts:

### ■ SÉBASTIEN GUÉRARD,

President of the French Federation of Physiotherapists (FFMKR) underlined: «*The sudden democratization of telework has exacerbated the problems already known in the working world. We now have a new category of patients*».

### ■ JEAN BERNARD FABRE,

Founder and CEO of HumanFab Research Center, specialized in the analysis of human motion, mentioned the deleterious effects of a sedentary lifestyle on health.

« With the emergence of teleworking, there is an increasing amount of spinal pain. In teleworking, you can spend more than 3 and a half hours sitting down without making any movements and work for more than 8 hours in total (compared to an average of 6 and a half hours face-to-face). There is less sense of the time and less interaction with the colleagues. Workstations must be adapted to limit the risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)...

By spending too much time sitting, the tone of the muscles responsible for the upright position decreases, accentuating the curvature (kyphosis) and the pressure areas at the level of the sacrum and the spine, the venous return is no longer done correctly, favouring an oedema in the lower limbs, pain can thus settle in the lumbar or lower limbs. Discomfort and pain in cervical, elbow or wrist may also appear. In addition, the decrease in energy expenditure and in cerebral oxygenation leads - in the long term - to a decrease in cognitive performance.



Fortunately there are some solutions! The preventive ones encourage movement, workstation adaptation and the use of ergonomic tools. In curative solutions, the role of the physiotherapist is essential. He can use his hands (massage), the ball and other tools to strengthen muscles. Among those tools, HUBER also allows stretching and neurocognitive work».

#### ■ PASCAL DESBOIS,

President of Kiné France Prévention, a federation of departmental or regional associations made up of physiotherapists trained in public health and occupational health prevention (350 to 400 practitioners throughout the national territory and overseas).

« The role of the physiotherapist is to intervene in health promotion, in prevention, education and rehabilitation. You should know that 87% of occupational diseases are MSDs and that 10% of employees are chronic disease carriers with a specific need for support. The physiotherapist is a body expert, movement expert and a body in motion expert. The risk factors of prolonged screen work are well known: postural pain and MSDs, visual tiredness, stress.

This can be achieved by:

- Managing the environment and the organisation of work (settling down properly in an appropriate place, re-building at best the day that one usually lives in the office),
- Setting up the workstation (screen, seat and keyboard adjustment),
- Promoting mobility and preventive movements (moving, taking breaks),
- Providing an appropriate management to avoid worker isolation.

Teleworking is an opportunity to take control of one's health. If one becomes aware of it, it allows us to develop and strengthen our physical and mental adaptive capacities to face unusual or unexpected and often very restrictive situations».

## IN CONCLUSION...



In the light of the recent health events, the role of the physiotherapist is becoming more and more important in the care of pathologies linked to teleworking.

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#### **SOURCE :**

1. Study of the occurrence and the evolution of low back pain according to the work situation during the lockdown linked to the Covid-19 epidemic, from March 17 to May 10, 2020, in metropolitan France. Emilie Chazelle et coll. BEH N° 26. Santé publique France. <http://beh.santepubliquefrance.fr/beh/>

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