



London, UK

rammya.mathew@nhs.net Follow

Rammya on Twitter: @RammyaMathew

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;372:n333

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n333>

Published: 09 February 2021

TAKING STOCK

Rammya Mathew: Is home working bad for our health?

Rammya Mathew *GP*

During the covid-19 pandemic most healthcare professionals have been going into work as we have always done. Amid the long days, the busier shifts, and the darkness that this pandemic has cast over us, we have been privileged enough to be able to get up every day, come to our places of work, and see, meet, and greet people in the flesh. By contrast, so many others around us have been catapulted into the realms of remote working without any opportunity to process what this might mean for them, and in particular how it might affect their physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing.

When it was all still a novelty, I saw many around me overjoyed as they said goodbye to their daily commute and embraced the “new normal” of their makeshift home office. But, almost a year in, the mood has changed. From the conversations that I am having with patients, it seems that we are now experiencing the fallout from a lack of daily routine, increasing physical inactivity, and the loss of human interaction, all of which work once provided.

For some people, the daily commute and the trips up and down the flights of stairs at the office were the only physical activity that they had in their day. Now this has been replaced by endless Zoom calls and Microsoft Teams meetings, which have allowed us to move seamlessly from one virtual space into the next but have us physically chained to our desks—often sedentary for hours on end. The long term effect of these enforced changes cannot be underestimated; there is good evidence that physical inactivity significantly increases the risk of many health problems, including stroke, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, falls, and even hip fractures.

The effect on mental health is equally concerning. The jarred on-screen business talk is no replacement for the real life conversations and the in-person support that once kept us meaningfully connected to our colleagues. Even if you aren't a fan of office banter, these interactions used to help break up and breathe life into the working day. Working from home means we miss out on these moments and instead spend our days physically isolated, with no one to easily turn to when things get tough or we start to feel under pressure.

I hear from friends and family in office jobs that their employers have no plans to bring their staff back into the office, even when the threat of covid-19 passes. Although we may have made these changes for the sake of public health, we have a duty to evaluate their effect on our health and wellbeing. Otherwise we will find ourselves walking head-on into the next public health disaster as we strip away many of the health benefits of our pre-covid working lives.

Competing interests: I co-lead Islington GP Federation's Quality Improvement Team.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.