

# Mayo Clinic Q & A - Dr. Cowl and Dr. Breeher - YouTube Capti...

Wed, 6/23 10:46AM 26:25

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

meetings, people, home, earbuds, pandemic, cowl, employees, set, day, office, working, monitor, laura, bit, sitting, workstation, eyes, find, occupational medicine, break

## SPEAKERS

Dr. Halena Gazelka, Narrator, Dr. Clayton Cowl, Dr. Laura Breeher

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- N** Narrator 00:01  
Coming up on Mayo Clinic Q&A,
  - D** Dr. Clayton Cowl 00:03  
You know, in today's stressful and kind of rapidly changing work environments, think just taking that little bit of time to tell someone, hey, I really appreciate the work that you're doing, really goes a long way, I think in sort of humanizing what we've been used to for many years that we really lost in the last year and a half with the pandemic.
  - N** Narrator 00:22  
Working from home during the pandemic has ushered in a whole new set of challenges to balancing work time and family time. Today, we look at tips to bring some normalcy to life, it can be as easy as taking a walk.
  - D** Dr. Laura Breeher 00:35  
Stepping outside and doing a 15-minute walk around the block or around a couple blocks just for that mental and physical break before they transition into family time. And I think

that that's a really good idea for the body and mind.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 00:49

Welcome, everyone to Mayo Clinic Q&A. I'm Dr. Halena Gazelka. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to readjust in many ways, including shifting to remote work for many individuals. Working from a home office has many benefits, but it also comes with quite a few challenges. With me today to discuss this are occupational medicine specialists, Dr. Laura Breeher, and Chair of the Division of Preventative, Occupational and Aerospace Medicine, Dr. Clayton Cowl. Thanks for being here today. I'm delighted to have you both here. And Clay, before we start, would you tell me and our listeners, what do occupational medicine and aerospace medicine have to do with each other?

**D** Dr. Clayton Cowl 01:32

Sure. So, occupational medicine is one of the subspecialties of the American Board of preventive medicine and aerospace medicine is another one of those subspecialties as well. And so, in our division, we have specialized programs for a variety of individuals employed across, you know, a variety of occupations. And that includes those in safety sensitive jobs, like health care providers, our physician health program, pilots, commercial truck and bus drivers, and you know, airline pilots and other, you know, individuals that have safety sensitive activities that they do as part of their daily routine.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:18

Laura, what does occupational health look like for you? How would you explain that to our listeners?

**D** Dr. Laura Breeher 02:24

I would say that occupational health is basically the specialty of helping workers stay at work and return to work. So, it's a preventive medicine specialty preventing workplace disability. And that's what we thrive on doing every single day.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:43

And you know, that's interesting, because I've always associated that with getting people back into a workplace that they came from. But now with people working at home that might look a little bit differently.

**D** Dr. Laura Breeher 02:53

Absolutely. Absolutely it does look very, very different, and I think employees and, you know, employers alike are learning many new things with people working from home. And sometimes it's easier to accommodate employees working from home, sometimes it's a little bit more difficult depending on the job.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 03:13

Well, there are a number of topics related to working from home, that I'm interested to ask you about today. But the first one is pertinent. I'm here in an office at Mayo Clinic, but yet, it is very pertinent to my job as well, Zoom fatigue. Why is it so fatiguing to be on Zoom? Tell us what we can learn about that.

**D** Dr. Clayton Cowl 03:33

Well, I guess I can start and say, you know, first of all, if we back up and think, you know, two or three years ago, if we were saying terms like Zoom and teams and Skype, you know, we would kind of looking at each other go what, but I mean, we all know, that's kind of a way of life now. And I think that, you know, once all these meetings and our activities at work went virtual, it went really quickly towards that. And so, you know, most workers really never had time to navigate one platform, they're navigating several platforms. And, you know, it added a new sense of like stress and things to think about, as part of I guess what we define as the new normal of our regular workday.

**D** Dr. Laura Breeher 04:21

Very. That's very, very true. You know, I think the other thing I've noticed with Zoom and other virtual meetings is we've really kind of taken away some of the informal interactions that we used to have in face-to-face meetings. So, we don't have the meeting before the meeting. We don't have those side conversations. We don't have, you know, the meeting, we're not talking to people on the way to the next meeting. And we've really taken away a lot of those transition times too. So, you know, I think especially early in the pandemic with the Zoom meetings, a meeting would end on the hour, and we would expect the meeting to drop right on the hour and start the next one. And people were getting really tired. There was no time to have that transition, even go, you know, grab a glass of water and those sorts of things. So, I think that meeting organizers are recognizing that and starting to build in even a five-minute buffer for a little bit of a transition so that employees can, you know, have a little bit more of that sanity back. And I think we also need to recognize when something doesn't need to be a video meeting. Like I really enjoy seeing my

colleague's faces, but it doesn't always need to be a video meeting. If it's a video meeting, we're great by default, sitting here talking to each other. If it's a phone meeting, we might be able to walk and talk which is wonderful these days, especially in the summer months where we can get outside in the Midwest.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 05:55

That is fascinating, Laura, because I remember before COVID, and so before I'd ever heard of Zoom, we used the system where we had all these phone meetings, and we didn't necessarily see one another. I had read an article recently about what's so different about being on Zoom meetings all day long versus being in person meetings, and one of the things they mentioned was that you weren't necessarily always feeling like your face was a focus of attention when you were in a meeting room, because someone would be looking at the speaker, there would be time off of you. But now everyone's face kind of gets equal time, and it's a little bit exhausting.

**D** Dr. Laura Breeher 06:31

Yeah, I can definitely appreciate that. I think that there's absolutely some truth to that. So, we need to have some sort of a balance, make video meetings only the meetings that they need to be video meetings.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 06:42

Right. And then you feel guilty if you turn your video off, and everybody else has theirs on. So, there's that.

**D** Dr. Laura Breeher 06:48

Absolutely. Pick a nice picture for a screenshot if you're going to turn your video off.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 06:53

That's right. That's right. So, speaking of screen time, what about eyes. You know, when I was a kid growing up, my parents always told me that I was sitting too close to the television, that I shouldn't spend too much time looking at the television or the computer because I was going to ruin my eyes. Tell me about eyes and screen time.

D

Dr. Laura Breeher 07:11

So, we actually are getting quite a few reports from employees about eye strain, and eye fatigue from being at the computer all day long. You know, prior to the pandemic, when people were working in the office, I think just the natural transition of the day, people would get up at least every hour to go do something sometimes at least every half hour. And these days, we are staring at a screen a lot of the day. And in the office, we often have our workstations set up, you know, ergonomically. At home, we transitioned so quickly, many of us did not have home offices that were set up correctly. I know I was guilty of this. I was having eyestrain early on, and I realized that my monitor was way too close. So, as a rule of thumb, your monitor is supposed to be about 20 inches away from your face. And that's about an arm distance away. So, if you can reach out, and your monitor is like right here with your elbow bent, that's way too close, you're going to be straining your eyes to focus that close. You need to have it far enough away that you're not straining your eyes. So, getting your monitor set up appropriately is really good. You know, there are absolutely devices out there like swing arm monitors that people can adjust the distance, but you can do it with, you know, a stack of books that you don't use and different tables and things like that, just pushing your desk a little bit away until it feels more comfortable to you and taking breaks.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 08:47

I didn't know about the 20-inch rule. I think that's good because I had spent so much focus on what my neck was doing up or down. Like if you're trying to use your little, you know, laptop computer and do meetings on there, you are sometimes kind of hunched over. So, that's a good idea.

D

Dr. Laura Breeher 09:01

Yeah. And then the height I think is important too. So, you know the height of the monitor is supposed to be, the top is supposed to be about eye level or a little bit below. And a lot of people are working on laptops at home. They have them down on their desks, so they're really looking down straining to see.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 09:18

What do you think of the blue light blocking glasses? Are those useful?

D

Dr. Laura Breeher 09:23

For some people they can be? You know, often. I think that within our own employee population, it seems like employees that have a diagnosis of migraine headaches are often the ones that will try out those blue light blocking glasses. I think for me, it would probably bother me to be wearing them throughout the day. Having my workstation, you know, once I got it set up appropriately, and for me it was coming into the office and sitting down and making a conscious effort to say okay, how far away is my monitor when I'm sitting at the office and going home and setting myself up with the same setup, and then it was just fine.



Dr. Halena Gazelka 10:05

Okay, and probably taking breaks to look out the windows at times too.



Dr. Laura Breeher 10:09

Taking conscious breaks, and your iPhone can help you do that, or your calendar can help you do that. I'm not good at reminding myself to take breaks.



Dr. Halena Gazelka 10:19

Many of us aren't. We get so absorbed in what we're doing.



Dr. Laura Breeher 10:22

Yeah.



Dr. Halena Gazelka 10:23

Well moving on from our eyes to our ears, what about earbuds? And the concern about hearing loss or how loud people play their earbuds? What would you have to tell, advice to give our listeners about that?



Dr. Laura Breeher 10:35

So, you know, ear buds, Dr. Cowl and I were just chatting about this yesterday also because we're also getting, you know, some questions from our employees about this. You know, noise related hearing loss is absolutely a concern. And so, people are wearing earbuds all day long, and they have the volume turned up, that is a risk for hearing loss. Earbuds really weren't meant to be used eight hours a day, you know, five plus days a week. So, ideally, you people would have a setup where they could have, you know, both

the audio and the microphone coming from a setup on their computer. If they can't do that having, you know, earmuffs with the speaker like this. Although if you wear this all day, your ears get pretty hot. So, it's kind of hard all day long. But yeah, earbuds I think were a quick solution, but they really aren't meant for a full day's work. Doctor Cowl anything to add to that?

**D** Dr. Clayton Cowl 11:08

I mean, I think just in general, they're great for mobility, not great for long-term hearing preservation. So, I think if you can find a good plug-in speaker that will get the job done. You know, certainly, you know, for if you're moving about and you don't have the camera on, or you have that telephone meeting we talked about earlier, it's great. But you know, we even see things like, over long periods of time, the external auditory canals, where, you know, those buds are jammed into in the side of your head, they'll start to get abrasions and those types of things. And it's, you know, the amount of exposure is just so much more than it used to be when you had face-to-face meetings as a regular part of your workday.

**D** Dr. Laura Breeher 12:29

You can actually get infections in your ear canals, kind of like swimmer's ear.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 12:34

I think it's hard because people are trying to close out the noise of the dog at home, the children at home by having a little more confined, so the earbuds seem necessary in that way, I suppose.

**D** Dr. Laura Breeher 12:47

We could see that. It's all a balance, right?

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 12:51

Well, eyes and ears. But I have to say that the one thing that I notice the most when I sit here and do meetings all day long is my neck and my back. And what do you tell people about, you know, orthopedic issues with this kind of sitting in front of a computer all day long?

D

Dr. Clayton Cowl 13:08

Yeah, you know, that is really interesting. It turns out, there are several factors that are really important in setting up a home office, and unfortunately, in the haste in the early 2020 pandemic year, there really wasn't a lot of time to sit and talk about, well, here's how you set up a home office. You know, we didn't have ergonomists available to go out and set up everyone's home. And it ends up that, you know, if your office is set up incorrectly at home, the amount of exposure time that you get in this sort of subpar environment really begins to take its toll, you know, as time goes on. And so, we do, we see workers with back pain and neck pain and also hand and wrist pain, much as we do for in person meetings, in an office setting on campus, for example. If they haven't been seen by an ergonomist or they have ergonomic related issues. And so, what we've really looked at is, the first thing is, invest in a good chair. Really one that is sort of ergonomically suited to your frame and for every size of body out there, there may be a different type of chair that works for you, and for the type of work that you do. Some people are doing more keyboarding, others are just mostly interacting in a meeting scenario. So, it really does, there's a lot of individual variability. I think the next thing would be to try to actually set up a place at home that you call your home office. And we've had a lot of employees have issues with sort of setting those boundaries and we've talked before about controlling white noise and background noise that's there. I mean, I think it's really important that if you are working from home, that you have office time and family time as separated as you can have. And it really needs to be a room, or at least a part of a room, where it's quiet, the light is appropriate, there's adequate ventilation, etc.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 15:22

I've noted, I have an Apple Watch, and it tells me to get up every hour and move around for at least a minute. And I find that really helpful. I also am blessed to have a sit to stand desk here so that I can move, but at home, sometimes I have set up my computer up on some books on the counter or a box or something so that I'm not always sitting when I'm in a meeting because you can get so sore.

D

Dr. Clayton Cowl 15:46

Yeah, you know, Dr. Breeher and I have talked a lot about, you know, how do we tell our employees and individuals who work for other firms outside of Mayo, you know, how to break up your day. Dr. Breeher, other thoughts?

D

Dr. Laura Breeher 16:02

Yeah, I mean, I think it's so personal. But you know, I think just echoing the same things, Dr.



Cowl said, you know, making sure that it's ergonomically set up. A lot of people started working at their kitchen table, and kitchen tables are not set up for the right height for working even when you're sitting. And you can, you know you absolutely can stack books to get kind of an alternate standing workstation, but your family probably won't tolerate you leaving that at your kitchen table for dinner every night. So, having a position somewhere where you can just leave it day after day and have a spot to sit and a spot to stand to alternate back and forth is good. The other thing, you know, that several employees have talked about doing is, you know, kind of building in a bit of a walking commute, especially at the end of the day just to break things up. So, you know, rather than at five o'clock or 5:30, when they finish work, you know, stepping from their home office out into the family responsibilities, stepping outside and doing a 15-minute walk around the block or around a couple blocks just for that mental and physical break before they transition into family time. And I think that that's a really good idea for the body and mind.



Dr. Halena Gazelka 17:22

That's a good idea, it mimics the drive home when you sometimes have a few minutes to kind of decompress or try to get your mind from the last list of things you left at work to what you're going home to.



Dr. Laura Breeher 17:32

Yeah, and you know, it's those sorts of things that we used to, you know, when people were working in the office, it was a given. That commute time was built in because it had to be. And I think a lot of people have given that up. And all of those, you know, time periods have now been filled with either work or home responsibilities, such as finding those little bits of time for people to decompress, I think it's good.



Dr. Halena Gazelka 17:58

I think the next topic is difficult, whether you're working at home, or whether you're working in an office, but the thought of the COVID-19 and weight gain, I think it's particularly difficult maybe working at home, because the kitchen is so available and people aren't walking to meetings, or some of the other activity that they might even have getting up and moving during the day. What do you, you know, what advice would you give about that?

D

Dr. Clayton Cowl 18:24

Yeah, we've often discussed the fact that it's like you've already mentioned, it's the COVID-19 for many people, and you know, I mean, just having normal patterns of exercise. I mean, look, we're all creatures of habit. And, you know, having that gym closed down, or activities that we would have normally done as just part of our normal day, and really didn't even chalk that up as exercise we couldn't do. And so, it really limited the amount of activity for certain people that sort of, you know, counted on that. And then meanwhile, they're stuck at home, I think with background stress about kind of fear of the unknown and that type of thing with, you know, with meetings going on top of each other as we just have got done discussing, but then also having that snack food available. And, you know, so we tend to be, as I said, creatures of habit. We probably need to have now a set of mid-year resolutions as opposed to New Year's resolutions. You know that kind of got skipped over this year.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 19:30

That's right.

D

Dr. Laura Breeher 19:31

Yeah, I mean, I think that, you know, one of one of the things that I'm actively trying to do on days that I might be working from home is planning what I'm going to eat early on, because I know that if I don't plan what I'm going to have for lunch, things are going to pick up and I'm going to get busy and then I'm going to have a five or 10 minute window where I'm going to come down and grab the quickest thing I can find which is often not the healthiest thing you can find. So, if I prep it the night before or prep it in the morning, just like we used to do when, you know, people would go to work, when they would pack their lunches, I think you'd end up with a lot healthier options that way.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 20:12

I think that's a great idea, Laura. I like that idea of thinking about it ahead of time. Because it is true. If you know that a meeting is coming up, and you just all of a sudden look at your schedule, and you're like, oh, my goodness, I'm so hungry and I've got 10 minutes, what can I ransack quickly. The other thing that I've done, which is I print my schedule out every morning, and I look at my list of meetings, and then I try to find where there's a 15-minute block. And I do have some stairs here in the building where I work. So, I'll go walk up and down the stairs for five minutes or something, but same concept at home to try to stretch. So, planning that in ahead of time, I think that's helpful.

**D** Dr. Laura Breeher 20:49  
Yeah.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 20:50  
Great tips.

**D** Dr. Laura Breeher 20:50  
In five minutes, you get a really good workout doing stairs. So, that's awesome.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 20:56  
And it gives me some steps on my Apple Watch, too, you know.

**D** Dr. Clayton Cowl 20:59  
There you go.

**D** Dr. Halena Gazelka 20:59  
My pedometer. What other tips do you have to help us be healthier while we're working at home?

**D** Dr. Clayton Cowl 21:06  
Well, I guess I'll say that, you know, besides some of the more obvious things we've talked about, like basic ergonomic things with furniture, and that sort of thing, getting the screens at the right height, I think, you know, it's finding those little opportunities, that sort of random acts of sharing joy in your day. And we sort of forget about that. You know, we've been focused so much on the pandemic, and what it means for myself and my family and what things we haven't been able to do, it's a bit of a negative sync. And I think, you know, to just remember to pick up the phone and make that effort to connect with friends and colleagues. You know, in today's stressful and kind of, well, clearly rapidly changing work environments, I think just taking that little bit of time to tell someone, hey, I really appreciate the work that you're doing, or that was a great insight at the meeting, really goes a long way I think in sort of humanizing what we've been used to for many years that we really lost in the last year and a half with the pandemic.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 22:13

I love that. We've started using a little bit of our Zoom meeting time, once a week, or once every couple of weeks to have a little coffee break just for a few minutes to talk about something other than work with some members of the department. And that's been really enjoyable actually. I love the idea of spreading joy. Now, are there any apps or tools that the two of you like to recommend for people working from home?

D

Dr. Laura Breeher 22:40

You know, I mean, I think that there's a wealth of resources on the internet. On [mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org), you know, you can search office ergonomics, and you can find some of the tips that we've talked about, how to set up your home workstation with just some simple steps. You can search office stretches, and there are some videos there that can walk you through kind of some five-minute sessions of office stretches. I really like the seated ones. Sometimes I do those during meetings, but I find myself getting a little bit stiff if I have some back-to-back meetings, and those are really helpful. And then, you know, just searching some healthy recipes and things like that, I think are good. In terms of kind of apps or tools you know, I think a lot of people have, many people have smartwatches, or smartphones. And I think just using that technology to your advantage, you know, as you were talking about to remind you to move, whether it's already programmed in where it says, hey, you've been sitting too long, get up and move, or if it's something where you program it to say, hey, you know, buzz me at 10 o'clock in the morning, because I know I have a little, you know, break there and I'm going to go, you know, do some stairs, or go do a lap around the block or something like that. Just so we're a little bit more conscious of that I think is a good thing. Doesn't have to be fancy. I think that it can be really simple, just to keep us moving in the right direction, especially the summer. I think everyone deserves a little happiness this summer. And I think the summer is going to be a lot more joyful than last summer was for sure.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 24:26

That's good news. That's wonderful. I had seen some apps for setting like habits, and it'll like you said Laura, would remind you, oh if three times today you were going to get up and stretch or something to do that. And it reminds you every day of the same things, and then you can mark it off when you do it. But it sounds like what you're saying is being intentional is important to get it done.

D

Dr. Clayton Cowl 24:50

Right. And although people won't necessarily need to go on any kind of crash diets or anything like that. I think even just logging calories, you know, so you have actual cognition that, oh boy, I better watch how much I'm just putting in my mouth in between meetings, you know, with no check on that. So, I think when you have to actually log that in, it adds another, you know, set of reminders of what am I doing here in my, and you know, just kind of robotically going through the day and having that food there at home is just way too easy.



Dr. Halena Gazelka 25:30

That's a great point. Thank you both for being here today.



Dr. Laura Breeher 25:35

Thank you so much for having us.



Dr. Halena Gazelka 25:36

Our thanks to occupational medicine specialists Dr. Laura Breeher and Dr. Clayton Cowl for being here today to teach us more about how to be healthier remote workers. I hope that you learned something. I know that I did. We wish each of you a wonderful day.



Narrator 25:52

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