

ACTION AREA 2 – Workplaces

Promote physical activity before, during and after work

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WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Physical activity in the workplace has diminished dramatically over the past five decades,⁽¹⁾ reflecting the rapid increase in the computerisation of work. This has led to prolonged sitting particularly in office and administrative work. Computerisation and mechanisation have also had a negative impact on physical activity in industries such as agriculture, transport and manufacturing, with technology leading to a significant reduction in manual labour.

Consider the case for change:

- Over 11 million Australians⁽²⁾ spend an average of eight hours per day in workplaces
- On average, more than two-thirds of the office workday is spent being sedentary, with much of this time accumulated in prolonged, unbroken bouts of 30 minutes or more⁽³⁾ – a sitting pattern that is particularly detrimental to health⁽⁴⁾
- There are both long-term and short-term impacts of too much sitting. These include increased risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and premature mortality,⁽⁵⁾ risk of anxiety,⁽⁶⁾ an increased number of musculoskeletal conditions^(7,8) and eye strain⁽⁹⁾
- There are economic implications associated with these conditions: long-term health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders contribute substantially to health expenditure in Australia⁽⁷⁾
- The workplace is increasingly being recognised (nationally and internationally) as a priority high-reach setting for health behaviour interventions,^(8, 9) extending from a labour-based approach to a public health 'healthy workers' approach⁽¹⁰⁾
- There is evidence to support the effectiveness of workplace physical activity interventions for improving both health and worksite outcomes, including physical activity behaviour, fitness, body mass index, productivity, work attendance, depressive symptoms, anxiety and job stress⁽¹¹⁻¹⁴⁾
- There is also increasing evidence that reducing prolonged sitting in the workplace is feasible and acceptable to employers and employees,⁽¹⁵⁾ and reductions achieved can be sustained for at least one year.⁽¹⁶⁾ There is emerging evidence that these reductions may have some benefits on health and wellbeing and indicators of work performance^(17, 18)
- In general, a physically active workforce can improve physical and mental health, reduce absenteeism and increase productivity, thereby providing important benefits to individuals and workplaces.⁽¹⁹⁻²¹⁾ Workplaces should see the implementation of physical activity programs as a strategic business-enhancement opportunity.





WHAT MUST BE DONE?

The workplace is an important setting for implementing interventions designed to increase levels of physical activity and reduce prolonged sitting time. These interventions should be multi-level and multifaceted, addressing individual behaviour-change techniques, mass-reach approaches (electronic and print media) and social support strategies, along with organisational, policy and physical environment initiatives^(22, 23) Interventions to decrease sitting within the workplace have been shown to have minimal negative effect on work tasks.⁽²⁴⁻²⁶⁾ The following multifaceted interventions will support healthier, more active and more productive workplaces:

- implement policies that encourage and support active commuting (see *Action area 4 – Active travel*)⁽²⁷⁾
- implement workplace active travel policies that provide incentives for staff to use alternative forms of transport to attend meetings (e.g. free bicycles, prepaid public transport cards) and reduce incentives to use private motor vehicles or taxis
- integrate physical activity measures into occupational health and safety (OHS) policies and meetings; include reducing prolonged sedentary behaviour as an objective of the OHS committee⁽²⁸⁾
- develop and use audits or checklists to assess the degree to which the workplace is 'activity-permissive'
- develop workplace policies that encourage and support regular changes between sitting and standing postures, as well facilitating incidental movement throughout the day, including through work task allocation and break schedules.

Plan, develop and retrofit workplace environments to promote physical activity:

- display point-of-decision prompts that encourage people to use stairs instead of a lift wherever possible as a low-cost and effective intervention⁽²⁹⁾
- build walking tracks outside the company or a 'red-line' route to promote lunchtime walking, and provide exercise equipment and space
- provide facilities (such as showers, lockers and secure cycle racks) in the workplace to increase active transport and physical activity levels⁽³⁰⁾
- provide appropriate onsite physical activity facilities in the workplace, as well as subsidised access to external exercise, fitness, sports clubs and facilities
- create an activity-permissive environment, including elements such as height-adjustable workstations,⁽³¹⁾ standing tables in meeting rooms and communal areas, access to safe stairs and centralised bins and printers.



Implement social and community interventions to promote physical activity before, during and after work:

- provide physical activity opportunities during work breaks, including programs such as regular lunchtime walking groups⁽³²⁾
- provide equitable access to programs for people with disabilities
- gain upper-management support and identify champions to serve as role models or spokespersons to model behaviour such as promoting standing breaks and participation in physical activity programs
- provide incentives for staff to use alternative forms of transport to attend meetings (e.g. free bicycles) and reduce incentives to use private motor vehicles or taxis.



Assist individuals to understand the benefits of being more active before, during and after work:

- distribute information and provide education about physical activity benefits and physical activity opportunities and programs
- promote the use of stairs and other physical activity facilities within or near the workplace
- communicate the effects of prolonged sitting on health; use software programs to promote standing and screen breaks
- use smartphone technology and social media to prompt participation in organised or unstructured work breaks and physical activity programs
- promote the use of active travel for commuting (for all or part of the journey)
- engage in local promotional activities such as TravelSmart Workplace programs
- create a 'dynamic' workplace culture where sitting less and moving more are the norm.⁽³³⁾

**See also Action area 4 – Active travel;
Action area 5 – Prolonged sitting (sedentary behaviour)**



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