

HEALTH

The new workout? It's at the office

The government is urging employers to prioritise health at work. Try these steps, says Peta Bee



Use an exercise ball; Increase your flights

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How healthy is your office lifestyle? With everything from chairs that worsen back pain to stress-inducing workloads and endless hours of desk-based sitting that play havoc with the metabolism, the workplace can single-handedly be held responsible for a downward spiral in health.

Awareness of the importance of workplace health is rising. A government [report](#) published last week urges employers to prioritise health to help to keep people in work and avoid long-term sickness. It coincides with the results of a survey by the health insurance firm Vitality that shows that helping employees to adopt healthier lifestyles increases productivity and reduces the number of sick days.

But where to start? “Many of the most effective changes are remarkably simple,” says Fehmidah Munir, a professor of health psychology and researcher in workplace wellness at the University of Loughborough. “Making small steps to change behaviour at work can bring big dividends.”

As long as those small steps don’t take you to the nearest vending machine, you will have made a start at boosting your office health. Here’s what to do next.

Don’t use the lift

Stairs are an underrated office fitness opportunity. There is plenty of research showing that adding even a flight a day can boost your health. “Start off small and don’t try to walk five flights on day one,” Munir says.

Even going downstairs provides a health boost. “Emerging research shows that walking down a flight of stairs has added benefits — stretching and elongating muscles rather than compressing them, which we do when climbing up. If you find stairs tough that’s a good way to start,” she says.

Gradually increase the flights accomplished daily. Last year University of Birmingham researchers [tracked](#) what happened when 16 sedentary office workers in their thirties were asked to complete a

four-floor stair climb and descent eight times during their working day. By the end of the eight-week study the group had significant reductions in blood sugar levels, “bad” LDL cholesterol and total cholesterol levels compared with a non-stair climbing control group.



Do a morning stretch

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Stretch before you start work

If you have been sitting down on your commute, try to stretch before you get to your desk. “Your hips, quadriceps and hamstrings will need loosening, so grab any opportunity in the lift or office to stretch them out before you sit down again,” says James Davies, an osteopath and the author of *Body* (HarperCollins). You can stretch your quads by placing your left hand on a wall and grabbing your right foot with your right hand, pulling heel towards bottom. Hold for ten seconds, then change sides. “Stretch your calf muscles by standing a foot or so from a wall, one foot in front of the other and placing both hands against the wall,” Davies says. “Bend the front knee and feel the stretch in the back leg, holding for ten seconds before repeating on the other side.”

Flex your spine as you sit

Discreet desk-based moves can help to mobilise the spine and release tension that creeps in around the lower back and shoulders. “They are an antidote to sitting with your back in a fixed position for a long time,” says Lexie Williamson, a yoga instructor and the author of *Move* (Bloomsbury). She suggests the cat stretch — sit with one hand

on each thigh, breathe in and lift the chest and chin, draw back the shoulders and, as you exhale, flex your back and tuck in your tailbone, tucking chin to chest. “Inhale again to lift your chest up and repeat six times in a row throughout the day,” she says.

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Davies suggests stretching out your forearms, spine, wrists and lower back in one move. Move your chair slightly back from the desk, interlace fingers in front of you and push arms out and away from the chest for five seconds. Raise the straightened arms, fingers interlaced, above your head for five seconds, then tilt your torso to each side for five seconds to feel a stretch. Ignore the sniggers of the less health-conscious members of your team — they will be crying with chronic back pain soon enough.

Bring an exercise ball to work

No office chair, however ergonomically designed, is perfect for everyone. “Your own musculoskeletal frame will determine which office seat is most suitable for you,” Munir says. “You don’t need the most expensive, and whatever you choose to sit on you should aim get up from it and change position regularly.”

With everything from kneeling chairs, which are said to reduce pressure on the hips and spine, to saddle stools designed to instil a posture that resembles standing, the market is overwhelming, but all have their pros and cons.

In one [study](#), an hour of sitting on an exercise ball at a desk led to a third more trunk motion and 66 per cent more activity of the back muscles, yet also produced greater levels of spinal shrinkage over time than a regular office chair, so getting off your butt as often as possible during your working day is recommended. “The best chair is one that you do not want to sit in all day,” Munir says.

Uncross everything

Most of us cross our arms, legs and feet when we work without realising it. And more often than not we cross on the same side. Roger Frampton, the movement specialist and author of *Stretch* (Pavilion), says it is bad news for our bodies, increasing the risk of back pain, hip tightness and shoulder stiffness.

“Constant crossing literally twists your body into pain points and causes tightness on one side,” he says. “By breaking the habit and uncrossing everything, you start to eliminate muscular imbalances that lead to back, shoulder and hip pain as well as long-term injuries.”



Switch your chair
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Rock, sway and sidestep when you stand to work

Desk-based workers spend about 70 per cent of their work day sitting down and are statistically more likely to sit for longer at home. It’s a vicious circle and breaking it by standing up as often as you can in the office will bring benefits. Height-adjustable desks that switch from standing to sitting positions were shown to cut the average middle-aged office worker’s daily sitting time by at least 64 minutes a day, according to a [study](#) involving 756 office workers from councils in Leicester, Greater Manchester and Liverpool published last year.

After 12 months, those using the sit-stand desks also reported better wellbeing and lower stress levels than colleagues who stayed sitting down to work. However, the University of Leicester researchers said that most participants “simply replaced sitting with standing” when what they needed to do was move more to significantly improve their health. “You don’t have to move much to bring about beneficial adaptations and just rocking, swaying, sidestepping or marching on the spot count as movement,” Munir says.

Do press-ups under your desk

If you can't get up and walk around, then simulating walking with calf movements beneath the desk is the next best thing. Davies says the simplest way to do this is to place your feet on the floor slightly apart, then raise and lower your heels as if standing on tiptoes. "Perform it for 20 repetitions several times over throughout the day to boost circulation in the lower legs," he says.

- [Six ways to improve your posture — and your health](#)

You could also try the soleus press-up, a sort of knee-bob that a [study](#) at the University of Houston showed helped to control blood sugar after eating. Start from a similar position, but alternate the raising of your heels as if in a running motion while keeping the balls of your feet in contact with the ground. Activating the soleus muscle that runs down the back of the leg from just below the knee to the heel can help to regulate blood glucose in a similar way to walking, although you do need to keep doing it for as long as possible throughout the day for maximum benefits.

Get a pot plant

A leafy green plant or two on your desk can help you to de-stress, according to [studies](#) that have shown spending just five or ten minutes in a room with houseplants left people feeling happier. In another study, sitting next to a tall plant led to raised feelings of positivity. As a bonus, plants may also be good for productivity. Psychologists at Cardiff and Exeter universities, among others, [showed](#) that people who work in offices with plenty of leafy green plants had greater levels of concentration than those who worked in plant-free spaces.

Take a lunch break (however short)

"For most people, the opportunity to take a daily lunch hour is unrealistic, but even a couple of 15-minute breaks can make a difference," says the chartered psychologist and burnout specialist Dr Julie Hannan. "Step outside and use that time to escape in whatever way suits you, whether that means just sitting quietly somewhere where you won't be disturbed and concentrating on your breathing so that you mentally relax and reset or doing some exercise."

If you join a gym, make it the one closest to work. A [study](#) showed that having to travel to a gym significantly affected how often people visited to work out. Otherwise, a brisk walk at a pace of 100 steps a minute or faster is good for mind and body. A recent [review](#) from the University of Cambridge involving more than 30 million participants from 94 large studies found that an 11-minute brisk daily walk could be enough to lower the risk of heart disease, stroke and a number of cancers.

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