

CPH News and Views

A semi-monthly column on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces

Issue # 31: Reducing Prolonged Sitting in the Workplace: Developing Best Practice

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A growing body of evidence shows that prolonged sitting in the workplace has important impacts on health.^{1,2} Time spent sitting has been consistently linked to elevated risks of diabetes and cardiovascular disease risk factors, and to premature mortality. Importantly, these health risks exist independently of the amount of leisure time physical activity. Given the widespread exposure to prolonged sitting among working people, this translates to a large preventable burden of disease.

Apart from the benefits to an individual's health, reduction in workplace sitting may have significant economic benefits by reducing health expenditure as well as the potential direct economic impact on employee health and wellbeing, as well as productivity and absenteeism and other measures of work performance. In terms of working populations most at risk, office workers, transport workers and highly mechanised trades have the greatest exposure to prolonged sitting, and therefore would reap the greatest health benefit from reduced sitting.

The key workplace strategies to reduce and break up prolonged sitting can be directed at the physical work environment (e.g., replacing sitting work stations with sit/stand work stations), the organization (e.g., redesign of jobs to reduce or break up sitting time, allowing people to sit or stand at meetings), and the individual (e.g., education to increase knowledge of the benefits sitting less and moving more at work, training to build skills in reducing and breaking up sitting time).

When changing from predominantly sitting at work to sitting less, standing more, and moving more, it is important to implement change gradually and to monitor implementation for possible adverse ergonomic or work performance impacts.¹ For example, prolonged standing in one place can also be highly fatiguing, and should be avoided (see News and Views issue # 7, "The hazards of just standing around"³). It is not necessary to eliminate sitting, but rather to reduce and break up sitting time. Breaking up sitting time can be accomplished by simply standing and moving for a few minutes periodically, such as walking to collect a print job or get a drink of water.

Like any other workplace health improvement, good practice should include:¹

- Gaining upper management support
- Employee participation and involvement in the planning and implementation of intervention
- Ensuring intervention strategies are sustainable and integrated
- Using multiple and mutually reinforcing strategies
- Providing flexibility for employers and employees to tailor the most appropriate strategies

A report illustrating the feasibility of reducing sedentary work has been put together by Comcare, the agency responsible for workplace safety, rehabilitation and compensation in the Australian Commonwealth Government sector.⁴ Office workers at Comcare were involved in a one-month pilot study which included the installation and use of sit-stand work stations. Sitting time was reduced by 25% - the equivalent of 2 hours in an 8-hour work day⁵. An information sheet (*Stand Up Comcare*) outlines the impact of, and strategies to reduce, sedentary time in the workplace; a complementary fact sheet (*Benefits of Moving - Be Upstanding!*)⁶ provides an overview of the health risks associated with long periods of sitting, the benefits of regular movement, and strategies that employers and workers can implement to reduce and break up sitting time at work.

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CPH-NEW

Center for the Promotion of Health
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