

Why a more active working life is a good idea whatever your age or office set-up



One of the many challenges of the past year of lockdowns has been how to build more exercise and activity into a stuck-at-home working day. Where previously even office-based work might have involved walking to the station or bus stop, changing platforms, walking from your final stop to the office, going up and down stairs while at work, going out for a walk at lunchtime, and doing the same on the way back in the evening, that all stopped.

Of course, even the above probably isn't enough, given the NHS's recommendation that we should all [do at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week](#). However, it's certainly better than hauling equipment downstairs from the bedroom to the home office, sitting at your laptop until it's time to wander to the kitchen for some lunch, and then adjourning to the sofa in the evening.

Perhaps it's little surprise therefore that so many of us have experienced more musculoskeletal aches and pains during the months of in/out lockdown since March last year.

Indeed, [a survey by the charity Versus Arthritis](#) last autumn concluded almost a quarter (23%) of home workers were experiencing musculoskeletal pain most or all of the time, with poor workplace set-ups and overly sedentary working habits largely to blame. Lower back pain was the most common complaint, with 50% reporting this, followed by neck pain (36%) and shoulder pain (28%).

This is where a health awareness calendar marker such as [National Walking Month](#) can play a valuable part. Now, for many of us walking has pretty much been the only exercise we've been able to pursue regularly during the lockdowns, and so being told to tramp again round the block or the local park may not sound like the most attractive option.

Nevertheless, even if you're sick to the teeth with the idea of walking as exercise, the now is a good springboard from which to step back, reflect on how active (or not) you are during your working day, and think about ways to make your lifestyle less sedentary, whether this is walking or some other form of activity.

Living Streets, which organises National Walking Month, points out that taking a brisk daily walk is actually a very easy way to improve your health over time. Just 20 minutes of walking a day can reduce the risk of a number of health conditions, including certain cancers, depression, heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, it suggests.

Issue for younger as well as older workers

Even before the pandemic, [the World Health Organization was warning](#) that 80% of adolescents were not being active enough, with too much screen use becoming a real issue. Again, the months of on/off lockdown are unlikely to have helped in this, especially as many younger workers have also been struggling with mental health and anxiety during the pandemic, which can feed through into feeling unable to get out and exercise.

May was National Walking Month. Even if we're all sick and tired of walking as the go-to exercise during the past year of lockdowns, it is nevertheless a good moment to be reflecting on how you can build more exercise and activity into your working day, irrespective of your age or whether you're still in a home office or now gradually venturing back into a physical workplace.

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WPA is a specialist not-for-profit health insurer. With a history dating back to 1901 they look after private individuals, families and all businesses from micro enterprises through to blue chip global brands.

Ways to become more active

So, what's to be done? Living Streets recommends a number of practical changes you can weave into your working day. These can include walking to work, especially now that some workplaces are opening back up. For those still working from home, introduce a 'walk to work' even if this means a circular walk as this also can help separate your mind to prepare from home to work.

If that's impractical, you could look at other options such as cycling to work or even just getting off a stop earlier so as to build in some extra steps.

It is also recommended to take the stairs instead of the lift or elevator if you are working in a physical workplace. With Covid restrictions often limiting the numbers allowed in elevators, there may not be much choice in this anyway.

Making stairways and stairwells more attractive and appealing, and so likely to be used more, may also be something you can raise with your employer, perhaps through any staff forum.

Get out and about to explore your local area or parks, perhaps by taking a lunchtime stroll. For those of us still working from home, this is probably something most will already have done to death, but it is nevertheless good advice.

For employees back in town or city centres, now could be a good opportunity to check out areas nearby that you haven't explored before, especially if the streets around you are much less busy than they once were.

Many councils have been using the pandemic to revisit their urban regeneration strategies and working to refresh previously neglected areas, making them more attractive for outdoor use.

Building an exercise routine into your day

Hook up with a friend or neighbour who is a regular walker and see if you can sometimes accompany them or perhaps do the occasional pet walk for them.

The broader point here is the value of building a routine into whatever exercise you start. So, whether it's first thing before work, in the evening after work or as a natural break in the middle of the day, becoming more active, and sustaining it, is about finding an activity you like (or like well enough) and then a time of day where it is going to fit best.

Sit/stand desks and at-desk exercises

Beyond these walking-related activities, it is possible to build more activity into your working day through the use of sit-stand desks and at-desk stretches and exercises. We looked at just this area in more depth recently and you can read about it [here](#).

Finally, alongside exercise and activity, it may be worthwhile addressing any health and wellbeing issues you may have around diet, cholesterol, blood pressure, alcohol consumption or smoking.

No one is suggesting you are going to be able to change a whole load of deeply ingrained habits overnight. In fact, there is a good argument to be made that taking small steps you can stick to and sustain is better than trying to make large changes that you end up giving up on.

Nevertheless, whatever your individual answer, and however you make your own difference, starting is the first step and, if using National Walking Month is the way to kickstart you to get off the couch and out on to your streets or parks, that's all good.

If, on top of that, you can take a holistic approach to improving your health and wellbeing – so considering exercise (whether walking or not) alongside diet and alcohol or smoking and so on – even better. Good luck and get outside!

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