



Exercise = A Better Worker? (adapted from MSNBC.com)

Drowning at work? Maybe you should take a break and get moving. New research finds that busy professionals who exercise during the day feel more productive. They're also less likely to spout off at colleagues and slam down the phone after they've worked up a sweat.

British researchers studied about 200 workers at three sites: a university, a computer company and a life insurance firm. Workers were asked to complete questionnaires about their job performance and mood on days when they exercised at work and days when they didn't. Participants were free to engage in the physical activity of their choice. Most of them spent 30 to 60 minutes at lunch doing everything from yoga and aerobics to strength training and playing pickup games of basketball.

Six out of 10 workers said their time management skills, mental performance and ability to meet deadlines improved on days when they exercised. The amount of the overall performance boost was about 15 percent, according to the findings, which were presented this month at a meeting of the American College of Sports Medicine in Nashville, Tenn. "The people who exercised went home feeling more satisfied with their day," says study author Jim McKenna, a professor of physical activity and health at Leeds Metropolitan University in the U.K. "We were surprised," he says. "We weren't expecting this amount of effect." All of the study participants were regular exercisers and they already felt they did a good job at work. But many still saw an improvement with exercise.

Any exercise helped

The type of exercise didn't seem to matter. "We could find no difference according to length of exercise or duration or intensity," McKenna says. "You still got the effect no matter what you did." Participants also rated their moods in the morning and afternoon. And as expected, exercise improved mood, a finding supported by other research, says McKenna. "There's a very strong mood effect with exercise," he says, adding that physical activity can be both energizing and tranquilizing.

During focus group discussions, many of the participants said exercise seemed to help them deal better with the demands and pressures on the job. "After exercise, people adopted a more tolerant attitude to themselves and to their work," says McKenna. "They were more tolerant of their own shortcomings and to those of others." They didn't lose their temper as much, for example, or yell at coworkers or slam the phone, he notes.

Workers in the study also indicated they were less likely to suffer bouts of afternoon fatigue known as the "post-lunch dip" on days when they exercised. "It's the paradox of exercise," says McKenna, "to get energy you have to expend some." Dr. I-Min Lee, an associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School in Boston who studies the effects of exercise, says other research supports the notion that exercise might help people do their jobs better, perhaps by improving mood or easing stress. But in the current study, participants exercised on the days of their choosing. So it's possible that they were already in a better mood on those days, she notes. "Thus, one might wonder whether on the days I chose to exercise, I might be in a better state (e.g. fewer errands to run, less stressed, my car didn't act up, my children were not called to the principal's office, etc.)," she says. "Did these findings reflect a positive effect of exercise, or did the fact that those exercising on a particular day do so because their life was progressing well?" she asks. Public-health researchers agree, though, that fitting exercise in during one's workday is a worthy goal for maintaining good health. Short bouts of activity, like taking a brisk walk at lunch or even opting for the stairs instead of the elevator a few times a day, can add up.

Encouraging employee fitness

McKenna says his findings should give companies an additional incentive to offer workplace exercise programs, which may also help cut down on sick days and reduce health-care costs. Chrys Shimizu, a senior staffing manager at Office Workouts, an Agoura, Calif., company that brings fitness to the workplace in ways as simple as dispatching a yoga teacher to an empty conference room to fully staffing corporate gyms, says employees appreciate the convenience of exercising at work and the fact that their companies offer the benefit.

"It certainly improves employee morale and decreases the turnaround," she says. But smaller companies often can't afford or don't have room to have on-site exercise classes or facilities, Shimizu points out. Of the 41.3 million Americans who belonged to a health club last year, 1.65 million, or 4 percent, belonged to a corporate fitness center, according to the International Health, Racquet and Sports-club Association, a Boston-based group that represents fitness clubs across the country. But IHRSA is hoping more companies offer exercise on the job or provide a fitness benefit that helps workers cover the cost of an off-site gym membership.

A bill in Congress, called the Workforce Health Improvement Program Act, would prevent employees from being taxed on benefits that compensate them for health-club dues and would also provide tax incentives for employers offering this benefit.



"...helped them deal better with the demands of the job..."



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Think Twice Before Back Surgery (adapted from MSNBC.com)

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Surgery to relieve chronic lower back pain is no better than intensive rehabilitation and nearly twice as expensive, researchers said on Monday. Low back pain is one of the world's most common complaints. In the 25-nation European Union, it affects over 40 million workers and accounts for half of all sick days.

Researchers at the Nuffield Orthopedic Center in Oxford, England found little difference when they compared the effects of surgery with rehabilitation on nearly 350 sufferers. "This is strong evidence that intensive rehabilitation is a good thing to do for people with chronic back pain who are thinking of having about having operations," said Jeremy Fairbank, an orthopedic surgeon at the center.



"The ultimate outcome ... is there is not much difference," he told Reuters. Fairbank and his colleagues studied 349 back pain sufferers who either had spinal fusion surgery or intensive rehabilitation involving exercises and cognitive behavioral therapy.

Thirty patients in the therapy group later had surgery. The researchers, whose findings are reported online by the British Medical Journal, concluded that there was no evidence that surgery was any better. But the average cost for a surgery patient was \$14,400, compared to \$8,285 for rehabilitation. "In the short term, compared with intensive rehabilitation, surgical stabilization of the spine as first line treatment for chronic low back pain patients who have already failed standard non-operative care seems not to be cost effective," said Helen Campbell of the University of Oxford in the journal.

Doctors suspect chronic back pain is caused by a combination of normal wear and tear on the joints of the back and poor muscle control. It is treated with physiotherapy, osteopathy, chiropody and surgery or a combination of treatments.

"The peak prevalence is in young middle age," said Fairbank. He added that surgeons offering spinal fusion surgery, in which one or more vertebrae of the spine are joined to stabilize a section of the spine, should explain all the options to patients.

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