



Physical Activity in the Workplace, Line Manager Guidance

This guidance document is to help line managers create a supportive working environment which promotes good health and wellbeing for all staff, focusing on physical activity. Including:

- benefits of an active workforce
- reducing sedentary behaviour
- active travel
- embedding physical activity
- supportive approach
- physical activity guidelines and signposting

Benefits of an active workforce

Physical activity in the workplace programmes have been shown to reduce absence by 20% in research from Price Waterhouse Coopers. Furthermore, physically active workers are absent 27% less than those who are not active, based on those who meet Chief Medical Officer guidelines.

If the benefits of physical activity were a pill, it would be the most cost-effective medicine ever invented, according to Dr Nick Cavill, Public Health England. Being regularly physically active reduces all-cause-death by 30%, reduces risk of heart disease, type II diabetes, obesity and certain cancers. There are also numerous mental health benefits. Physical activity helps too:

- Manage stress and anxiety
- Lower risk of depression
- Alleviate symptoms of mild to moderate depression
- Improve sleep
- Reduce risk of dementia

Those who are active for more than 150 minutes per week report better overall wellbeing, according to the Sport England Active Lives survey 2020, feeling more satisfied with life, happier, more worthwhile and less anxious. Improvements in these categories rise with amount of activity (with anxiety levels decreasing in those more active).

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There are also day to day benefits gained from being active which directly affect workplace performance:

- Improved self-esteem and confidence
- Improved mood and sense of wellbeing
- Improved concentration and focus
- Improved team working

Promoting and encouraging an active lifestyle is therefore beneficial for your staff and your organisation overall both on a day to day basis and in the long term.

Reducing Sedentary Behaviour

Sedentary behaviour is any time spent sitting (or lying) during normal waking hours. Research into the harmful effects of too much sitting still is continuing to grow. It is recommended we all aim to keep sedentary time to a maximum of four hours per day and aim to break up periods of sitting still with regular standing and moving.

The average UK worker spends around nine hours sitting still each day.

The typical office environment could therefore be harmful to our health, but just small changes in the working day can make a big difference. Such as:

- Standing, stretching and briefly moving away from your area of work for one or two minutes every half an hour.
- Standing up and having a screen break for five minutes on the hour mark. This time could be spent speaking to a colleague instead of emailing, or going outside, if working from home.
- Standing up when on the phone
- Standing or walking meetings
- Checking emails on a phone, while standing
- Taking lunch breaks away from the work area, which could include going outside for a walk, or exercising
- Walking up and down the corridor or a flight of stairs regularly throughout the day.

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Those who regularly move throughout the day report feeling less tired and can concentrate and focus better after just a minute or two away from their seat. Line managers have a key role to play in modelling and encouraging this behaviour, by sharing the benefits of reducing sedentary behaviour and regularly reminding the team that moving about more is good for their health and their productivity. Those who are 'too busy' to take a two-minute walk are likely to get more done in the next 58 minutes if they do.

Active Travel

The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) state that those who are active as part of their commute to work report improved concentration, improved decision making and feel under less pressure than those whose journey is not active. Exercising outdoors, such as walking, cycling or running, is beneficial for relieving symptoms of mild to moderate depression and can also reduce the risk of depression.

Including a 10-minute walk as part of the journey to and from work would mean 100 minutes of physical activity (for full time staff) each week, almost reaching the Chief Medical Office physical activity guidelines.

Line managers can support active travel, in keeping with company active travel policy. A template is available in the [Workplace Movement](#) resource library if your organisation does not already have a policy in place.

- Share the benefits of active travel with the team
- Allow for flexibility on start and finish time for those who want to include 10 minutes or more of active travel in their journey.
- Promote and encourage active travel for work journeys during the day. This can also be good for company image.
- Tie in with national campaigns like national walk to work week, usually in May.
- Share information on public transport options.
- Promote any organisational benefits which help with active travel, like cycle to work schemes or public transport season ticket loans. The

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average employee is unaware of most workplace wellbeing benefits their organisation provides, so reminding people regularly is important.

Embedding Physical Activity

Time is usually cited as the most common reason for people not to be active, or not to engage in workplace wellbeing initiatives. Whether we actually are too busy or not, this perception causes a barrier. If being more active becomes another thing people have to do on top of all their normal day to day duties it is not likely to happen, except perhaps for those who are already active. To help the average staff member, physical activity has to be embedded into the working day or through something they enjoy.

As a line manager, creating this cultural shift is likely to be a gradual process, but can be a simple, with small changes making a big difference. We recommend the following:

- Encouraging staff ownership. [Physical activity champions training](#) is available as part of Workplace Movement.
- Include wellbeing as a standing agenda item at all team meetings
- Include wellbeing as a standard point in all staff one to ones.
- Encourage small changes to existing working practice rather than adding extra things, using some of the steps in the sedentary behaviour section.
- Standing or walking meetings or regular standing during longer meetings/training
- Walking one to ones
- Encourage use of the stairs instead of lifts
- Try being more active yourself. It will help with your own wellbeing and if you can talk to staff about how much better you feel and prove you have the time to do it yourself, they are much more likely to engage.

Supportive Approach

Adopting a supportive approach is key. Telling people what to do is unlikely to be effective, even if you as a line manager feel certain staff really need to be more active or change other behaviours. Aim to help and encourage.

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Focus wellbeing initiatives on the whole team, to ensure no-one feels they are being singled out.

It is important to share information about the benefits of changing behaviours, but make sure not to stress the business benefits too much as this can lead to staff feeling like wellbeing is being done to them, in order to make them work harder.

When discussing wellbeing, asking questions is recommended over giving advice. Line managers do not have to be the expert and are not there to solve people's health problems. Using open questions in any discussion on wellbeing allows staff members to reach their own solutions and feel in control.

Regularly asking about health and wellbeing, in each one to one, is important because this shows staff members their line manager cares. If the only time staff are asked how they are feeling or if they are well is when they clearly have a problem, this can make people feel under pressure and much more difficult to support. Discussing wellbeing on a regular basis should lead to staff feeling they can approach their line manager with any concerns. This helps address problems early.

An ideal situation to aspire to is that staff know they can talk to their line manager, who will listen and signpost onto appropriate support. Keeping up to date with your organisation's policies, procedures and support pathways therefore is really important so as a manager you feel confident to be able to signpost to the right help, or at least know where to look or who can provide further advice.

Physical Activity Guidelines and Signposting

A copy of the Chief Medical Officer Physical Activity Guidelines 2019 is in the Workplace Movement resource library, or you can find this online [here](#)

In summary, the guidelines recommend adults get 150 minute or more of moderate physical activity per week. Anything which slightly raises breathing rate for bouts of 10 minutes or more counts towards this target. Alternatively, similar benefits can be achieved through 75 minutes of vigorous exercise per week. Weight bearing exercise is recommended on at least two days per week.

A new addition to the guidelines is that some exercise is good, more is better. So even for those not achieving the guidelines, every extra bit of exercise makes a difference.

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Guidance for older adults aged over 65 and children and young people is slightly different. Please see full guidelines for details.

Further guidance from NICE is available in the Workplace Movement resource library, including advice for line managers looking to create healthy workplace cultures and encourage physical activity.

To learn more about Workplace Movement or to sign up visit:
www.workplacemovement.co.uk or email Khalil Rener, Workplace
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