Physical Activity at Work – The Business Case

This information on the business case for physical activity in the workplace is compiled from various sources. The accuracy of any statistics and facts reproduced here relies on the original source of information at the time of publication, referenced at the end of the document. Only reputable sources have been used.

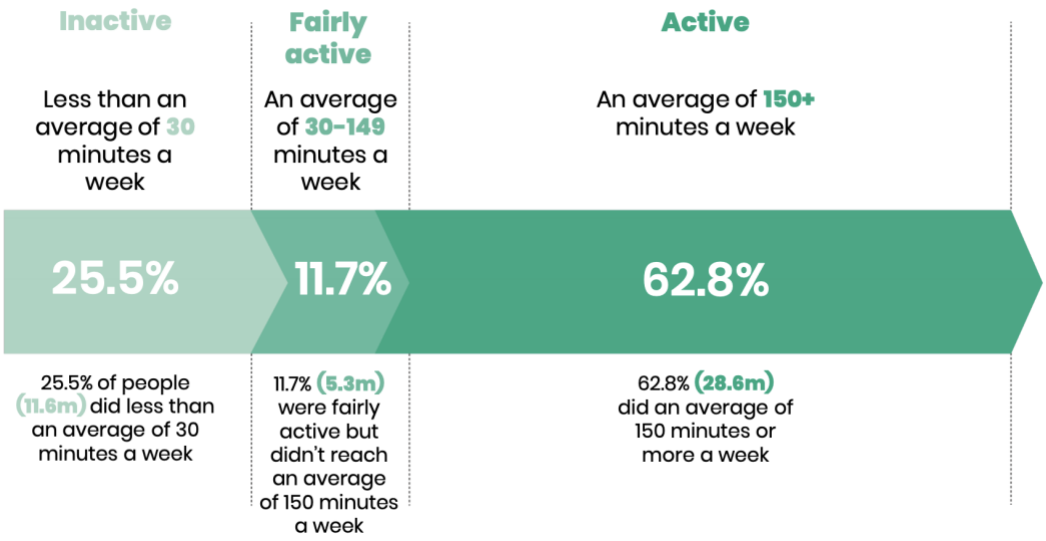
We have included a summary of the business case here, with further detail across the following pages.

- Physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour are harmful to health for employees and have significant impact on sickness absence, presenteeism and workplace performance.
- Many workplaces are a major contributor to sedentary behaviour
- The annual cost of physical inactivity to UK businesses is £6.6billion
- Physically inactive workers lose up to four and a half working days per year compared to those who are active, through absence and presenteeism.
- Being active is vital for good health and wellbeing, including mental health.
- Those who are active have lower risk of depression, anxiety and stress and physical activity helps to reduce symptoms and manage existing conditions.
- Workplace morale, teamwork and concentration are improved by physical activity and sport.
- The top three causes of long-term sickness absence and two of the top three short-term causes are associated with a lack of physical activity, with reduced risk and better management of conditions in physically active employees.
- Physical activity reduces absence, reduces presenteeism, improves performance, improves physical and mental health and provides a significant return on investment.

Physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour

The UK Chief Medical Officer recommends adults engage in physical activity for at least 150 minutes every week. Activity which contributes towards this total should be in bouts of 10 minutes or more and should be of at least moderate effort, enough to raise breathing and heart rate. Some activity is good, more is better.

In the latest Sport England Active Lives Survey, released in October 2020, 11.6m people (25.5%) were doing less than 30 minutes of activity per week, with 5.3million people (11.7%) doing more than 30 minutes, but less than the recommended 150 minutes. These figures show an increase in the number of physically active adults, with inactive figures the lowest ever recorded on this survey.[1] Active Partnerships, Sport England and partners in the sport and physical activity sector continue to work to tackle inactivity, making active lifestyles the social norm.



Sedentary behaviour, classed as any period of very low physical activity spent sitting or lying down (outside of normal sleeping pattern), is a risk factor for poor health and workplace performance, independent of weekly physical activity levels.

More research is emerging on this topic, but it is suggested that even those who are classed as physically active and engage in more than 150 minutes per week of activity are still subject to harmful effects of sedentary behaviour. The World Health Organisation's 2020 Guidelines of Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour highlight that 'Higher amounts of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity can attenuate the detrimental association between sedentary behaviour and health outcomes.'[2]

The average UK office worker is reported to be sedentary for around nine hours per day, with early research suggesting more than two-four hours is harmful for physical and mental health and wellbeing, also affecting workplace productivity. It is recommended to break up periods of sitting where possible, with short bouts of movement, especially sedentary periods of more than 30 minutes (for example, while working at a desk). Those unable to stand should still aim to break up sedentary periods by moving where possible, through wheeling, upper body movement, chair exercises or stretching, for example.

The cost of inactivity

Physical inactivity is one of the ten most important health risk factors in the UK[3] and is responsible for one in six premature deaths[4]. The impact of inactivity affects physical and mental health, employability and

workplace performance, therefore associated costs are shared amongst a number of groups including government and local authorities, health services and workplaces.

Inactivity cost the NHS around £1billion a year[5] as part of overall costs to the UK in the region of £7.4billion[6].

A recent study from September 2019 suggests the annual cost to UK business from physically inactive workers is £6.6billion[7]

Business costs are associated with ill-health conditions, linked to sickness absence, employee turnover, presenteeism (meaning employees attend work, but are unwell and less productive), accidents, injuries, claims and resulting impact on company profile.

A 2019 report from Rand Europe suggests an individual who is not physically active loses a larger amount of working time due to absenteeism (between 0.44 and 0.86 days per year) compared to an individual who is physically active. In terms of presenteeism, an individual who is not physically active again loses a larger amount of working time (between 2.6 and 3.71 days per year) compared to an individual who is physically active.[8] These findings suggest physically inactive individuals lose up to four and a half working days per year, almost a whole working week, compared to active individuals, through combined sickness absence and presenteeism. Workplaces therefore, particular those involving sedentary jobs, can be significantly impacted by physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour, both financially and in terms of lost productivity.

Physical activity and health

The physical and mental health benefits of physical activity and exercise are well documented.

The NHS state it is medically proven than people who do regular physical activity have:

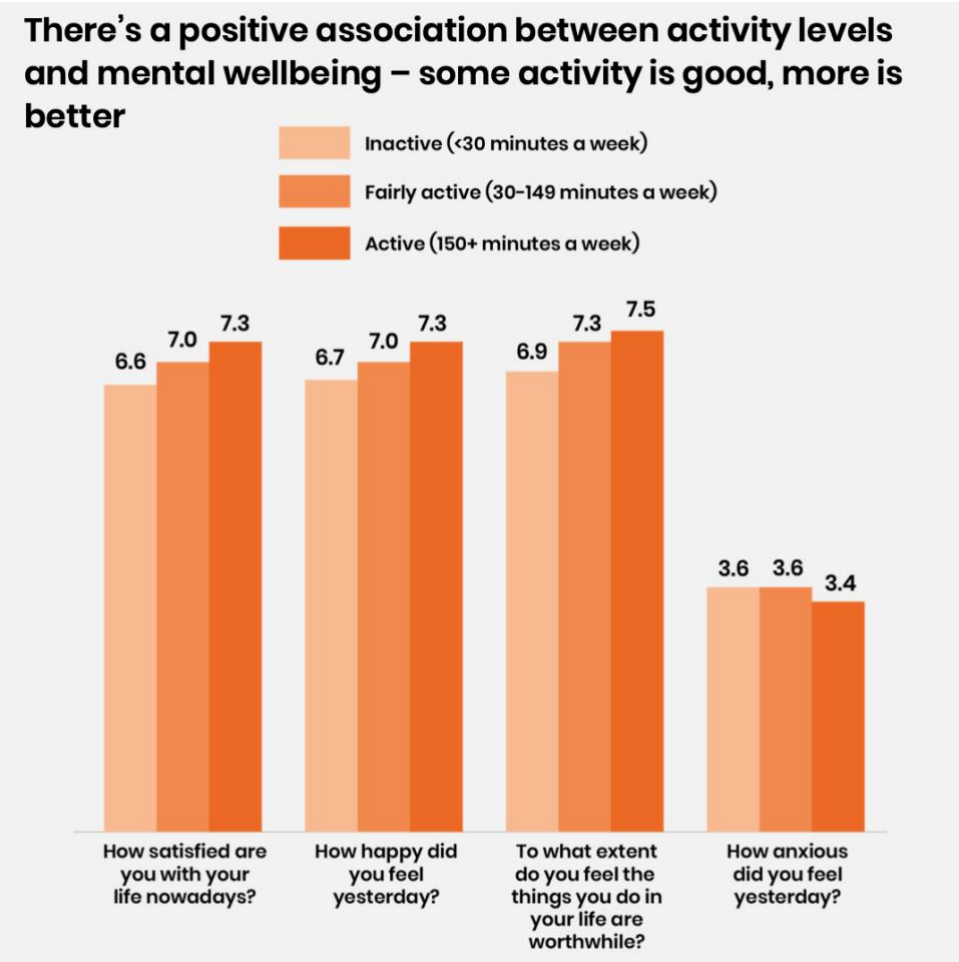
- A 30% lower risk of early death
- Up to a 35% lower risk of heart disease and stroke
- Up to a 50% lower risk of type 2 diabetes
- Up to a 50% lower risk of colon cancer
- Up to a 20% lower risk of breast cancer
- Up to 83% lower risk of osteoarthritis
- Up to 68% lower risk of hip fracture

- Up to 30% lower risk of dementia
- A 30% lower risk of falls (amongst older adults)[9]

The UK Chief Medical Officer states physical activity and sport prevents ill-health conditions, manages existing conditions, improves quality of sleep, increases energy levels and maintains strength, balance and motor skills.[10]

Physical activity also enhances mental health and wellbeing with improved cognitive function, improved confidence and self-esteem and reduces anxiety, stress and depression.[11]

The Sport England Active Lives survey asks questions on mental wellbeing in addition to physical activity levels and shows those who are active have a better life satisfaction score than those who are fairly active, who in turn have a better score relative to those who are inactive. This shows a positive link between being more active and mental wellbeing in all four wellbeing measures used in the survey.[12] Graphs shown on the next page.



Physical activity in the workplace

Wellbeing in the workplace programmes can give employers a leading edge and are increasingly becoming expected by employees. Being physically active provides numerous health and wellbeing benefits for individuals including addressing the main causes of absence, which in turn provides organisational benefits. Physical activity can also enhance workplace productivity and performance.

The CIPD annual health and wellbeing survey 2020 found five out of six employers are providing wellbeing support for staff.[13] The range and depth of provision varies, however the 56% workplaces who do not currently have a workplace wellbeing strategy for their staff are less likely to be seen as employers of choice.

Mental ill-health, musculoskeletal problems and stress are the three leading causes of long-term absence from the workplace and make up two of the top three causes of short-term absence.[14] All three areas are associated with a lack of physical activity and being more physically active can help to lower risks and alleviate symptoms, therefore physical activity can be seen as key in addressing the main causes of absence in the workplace.

Physical activity and sport are excellent ways to improve workplace relationships, morale and team working. "Sport holds benefits not only for individual health but also for group cohesion and performance and organisational benefits such as increased work performance."[15]

Physical activity in the workplace programmes have been shown to reduce absence by 20%. [16]

Physically active workers take 27% fewer sick days.[17]

The return on investment (ROI) for physical activity in the workplace programmes is a £34 return for every £1 invested.[18]

There are also legislative requirements which encourage moving away from screens, taking regular breaks, minimising risk of musculoskeletal injury and stress including DSE Regulations, Working Time Directive, Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

The workplace plays an important role in improving the health and wellbeing not only of workers, but of the communities it serves. NICE guidance suggests health information shared at work has a wider impact

for the community as employees share information and advice with family and friends.

To learn more about Workplace Movement or to sign up visit: www.workplacemovement.co.uk or email Nicki Couzens, ncouzens@ActivePartnerships.org

---

Active Lives Adult Survey May 2019/20 Report, Published October 2020

[2] WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020.
[3] Newton et al. (2015) Changes in health in England, with analysis by English regions and areas of deprivation, 1990–2013: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2013. Lancet 386: 2257–74.

[4] Lee IM, et al. (2012). Effect of physical inactivity on major non-communicable diseases worldwide: an analysis of burden of disease and life expectancy. Lancet 380: 219–29.

[5] Making the case for public health interventions The King's Fund; The economic burden of ill health due to diet, physical inactivity, smoking, alcohol and obesity in the UK: an update to 2006-07 NHS costs Scarborough et al. 2014 update

[6] Physical Activity: Applying all our health, .GOV.UK updated Oct 2019

[7] The economics of exercise Measuring the business benefit of being physically fit A report for AXA PPP healthcare September 2019

[8] The Economic Benefits of a More Physically Active Population, Rand Europe 2019

[9] NHS Live Well

[10] UK Chief Medical Officer Physical Activity Guidelines 2019
[11] UK Chief Medical Officer Physical Activity Guidelines 2019

[12] Sport England, Active Lives Adult Survey May 19/20 report, Published October 2020

[13] CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work survey, March 2020
[14] CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work survey, March 2020

[15] BRINKLEY, A., MCDERMOTT, H. and MUNIR, F., 2017. What benefits does team sport hold for the workplace? A systematic review. Journal of Sports Sciences

[16] Health, Work and Wellbeing Programme - Working for a healthier tomorrow 2008

[17] Building the Case for Wellness, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008

This information is for guidance purposes only. Workplace Movement and Active Partnerships are not responsible for any incident, loss or damage incurred as a result of following this guidance.

[18] British Heart Foundation, Health at Work - Economic evidence report for workplace health, 2016