

Your Desk Could Kill You

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Every two hours or so, an American dies in a workplace accident.

The pace of fatalities, however, has fallen by 40 percent in two decades as American workplaces have gravitated away from obviously dangerous job sites – construction, factories, mines or transportation – to the relative safety of an office.

According to research, sitting for long periods isn't good for your health even if you exercise after, and some companies are offering their employees a chance to exercise while working, with innovations like treadmills attached to desks.



Well, your doctor may think otherwise. Delegates to the upcoming American Medical Association's annual convention in Chicago starting Saturday are set to debate a series of health directives to set health care priorities. One item up for a vote: Resolution No. 413, which states "there are potential risks of prolonged sitting and (AMA should) encourage efforts by employers, employees, and others to make available alternatives."

The AMA worry stems, in part, from **an Australian study that tied 7 percent of adult deaths to excess sitting** – and that trend held across all genders, ages and body sizes. The AMA resolution notes that "many individuals are forced to spend numerous hours each day sitting while at work or in the classroom without available alternatives."

There's nothing really shocking about the health risks of being a "desk jockey" or "couch potato" – or whatever you might call a sedentary lifestyle. The limited studies of the topic do note very daunting trends, at the workplace and beyond:

•**Physical inactivity may be among the top 10 killers on the planet**, the World Health Organization says. As much as 85 percent of the world may suffer somewhat from this plight.

•Canadian researchers found "**depressive symptoms and low satisfaction with life**" tied to **sedentary life**.

•Researchers from Denmark and Harvard University say **every two extra hours of watching TV increases your odds of getting everything from diabetes to heart problems**.

Clearly, your office boss isn't to fully blame for your sit-on-your-rear lifestyle. Modern life – where many necessities can be acquired with ease, even in many developing countries – created a broader trend toward overeating and under-exercising. That's made what many health experts called lifestyle-related "preventable diseases" a near epidemic.

But work eats up much of an American's life these days. Well, it does for those who have jobs. And these days, office work is a growing slice of that employment existence. So getting bosses to focus on an office worker's healthier lifestyle isn't out of the question. If nothing else, somebody smart has to tailor a message to employers (and their bean counters) that healthier workers not only are more productive, but these active workers also cost less to insure.

Sadly, there aren't great, easy solutions for a proactive boss seeking to pump up the fitness of deskbound employees. But here's a sampling:

•**Install desk/treadmill contraptions that allow the worker to exercise while doing deskbound chores**. Knowing how much employers grumble about modest increases in employee costs, don't bet on your boss placing one of these pricey items in your cubicle any year soon.

•**Simple upright desks do get people standing**. It's one solution mentioned by the AMA. That could eliminate a modest slice of the sitting problem – but there's limited medical evidence that grinding away while standing, if stuck in place, gets one much exercise.

•**Substituting large "isometric" exercise balls for chairs** also is on the AMA wish list. For one, workers can do various exercises while in their workspace. And, two, the somewhat awkward nature of these balls forces most folks to get up now and then. This certainly isn't for every worker. And I can't imagine what a workplace litigation expert would tell a boss what the liability would be when somebody gets hurt using a desk ball.



Encourage standing or walking meetings. An improvement to a typically sedentary day, for sure. Lots of logistical questions pop up, from new style meeting rooms to where we walk to "Does this mean no more PowerPoints?"

•**Add exercise facilities at the workplace**, or make them subsidized by employers. It would seem to be a simple cure – as long as employees were allowed time, if not nudged, to use the workout spaces.

•**This all could lead to some sort of mandated exercise break for deskbound workers.** (Many hourly workers have mandatory breaks already!) You can hear the anti-regulation crowd screaming right now. And to be fair, you can bet any potential rules would have some silly component to them. But if the problem is that serious, regulation could be an end result of the doctors' worry.

One obvious and little-studied downside of all the powerful electronic tools – and toys – we've been handed in recent years is that it makes it too darn easy to sit in one place and (1) get lots of work done and (2) fill lots of free time – without a human getting vertical. As more jobs get more and more demanding of more and more desk work, something has got to give at the workplace.

And America's doctors want to remind you – formally or not – that your desk can be a lethal workplace tool

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