

Increasing physical activity levels among employees

Creating a physical activity policy for the workplace

Introduction

Adequate physical activity* reduces risk for several diseases and conditions, including cardiovascular disease, stroke, high blood pressure, obesity, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, colon cancer, breast cancer, anxiety and depression.^{1, 2, 3}

Unfortunately, nearly one-third of adult Minnesotans do not get enough physical activity per week to meet CDC recommendations.⁴ As an employer, you have a unique opportunity to support increased physical activity levels among your employees by creating a worksite that makes it easy to build activity into the day, including places, indoor and outdoor, to be active.

When employers provide support, programs or incentives for employees to be active, employees are more likely to use their breaks during the workday for physical activity.⁴ Preliminary research suggests that employer support may influence workers' activity during time *away* from work as well. This is good news for employers. According to several studies, physically active employees are, on average, both more productive and less costly (in terms of health care expenses) than inactive employees.^{5, 6, 7}

The best practice for employers who want to increase physical activity among employees includes the following components:

- **Availability and identification** of places for physical activity
- **Policies** that support physical activity
- **Programs** that promote more physical activity
- **Promotion** of opportunities for physical activity

1 Kahn, Ramsey, Brownson, Heath et al. and the Task Force on Community Preventive Services. (2002) The effectiveness of interventions to increase physical activity. *AJPM*, 22, 73-107.

2 Mokdad, Marks, Stroup and Gerberding (2004), Actual causes of death in the U.S., 2000. *JAMA*, 291, 1238-1245.

3 Bulwer, B. (2004). Sedentary lifestyles, physical activity, and cardiovascular disease: From research to practice. *Critical Pathways in Cardiology*, 3,184.

4 CDC physical activity recommendation as measured in the Minnesota Physical Activity Survey 2007. *Recommendation: a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate activity per week OR a minimum of 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week OR a combination of the two where vigorous minutes count double toward the 150 minute requirement. Spreading activity over several days per week is *encouraged but not required*.

5 Foldes, Bland, An et al. Modifiable Health Risks and Short-Term Health Care Costs. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota internal research, submitted for publication.

6 Anderson, 2000. *American Journal of Health Promotion*. 15:1.

7 Bunn, *JOEM*, 2006, 48:10.

Healthy Worksites **checklist** for physical activity

Review the following checklist to assess the availability of physical activity opportunities at your workplace. The ideal answer for each action item is “yes”. Consider adding the “yes” opportunities to your formal physical activity policy. For “no” answers, plan to address those items within the next year or two, and then review and add them to your written policy.

Action item	Answer	
1. Does your workplace have an indoor route employees can use for walking? Comments:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
2. Is there an outdoor route near your workplace that employees can use for walking? Comments:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
3. Does your workplace have a dedicated room or fitness center (that includes equipment such as a treadmill, weights, yoga mats, etc.) available for employees to use for physical activity? If yes, describe the room/center in the comments section. Comments:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
If yes to question #3: Is the room/fitness center available to employees before work hours? After work hours? During work hours? Comments:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> No
4. Are the stairwells safe (and accessible) for employee use? <input type="checkbox"/> No stairwells Comments:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
5. Does your organization provide a place for bicycle commuters to safely store bikes? Comments:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
6. Does your organization reward employees who choose to walk or bike to work, or who park in remote lots? (For example, provide those employees with their own private lockers, or provide a flexible or late start time in exchange for their choice to commute to work in an active way)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
7. Does your organization allow employees to use paid time (not lunch hours) to be active during the workday? Comments:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
8. Does your organization allow employees the opportunity to flex hours in order to make it easier to be active before, after, or during the workday? [For example, the option to start work an hour early in order to take a physical activity break during the day.] Comments:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
9. Does your organization encourage movement throughout the day by a. Hosting standing/walking meetings b. Offering employees the option of standing or active workstations c. Supporting employees moving during the day	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> No
10. Does your organization regularly investigate barriers to employees being active at work?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

Action item	Answer	
11. Does your organization provide opportunities for physical activity support by offering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. group classes b. walking clubs c. mentor programs or coaching d. partnering with local organizations (such as the school district) to offer additional places for employees to walk/get in activity) 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> No
12. Does your organization have a promotional plan that regularly reminds employees of opportunities to be active during the workday? Comments:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Notes:		

Availability and identification of places for physical activity

Identify potential places for indoor and outdoor walking routes

For indoor walking routes, consider hallways, stairways and common areas. For outdoor walking paths, consider company property that could accommodate a new path, existing sidewalks, nearby community walking paths, indoor malls and nearby schools.

Map out a 10- to 20-minute route

If the route is too short, employees may tire of making many small loops. If it is too long, employees may not feel as if they have time in their day to use it. A 10- to 20-minute route makes it accessible for breaks, lunch time and walking meetings.

Dedicate a room for physical activity

Room for physical activity can vary greatly – from 10-minute fitness-break rooms to large-scale fitness centers. For many workplaces, dedicating a room for employees to use for physical activity is more feasible than providing a full-scale fitness center.

Build movement into the workday

Encourage standing or walking meetings. Offer employees the option of sit-to-stand or active workstations (walking workstation). Ask company leaders to host standing or walking meetings.

Walking programs

Walking programs can be a nice complement to your healthy workplace culture. It is important to spend time ensuring that you have first improved the environment (places for activity) versus beginning your approach by holding a walking program.

- Without programs, places are less likely to be used.
- Without a supportive culture, programs are less likely to increase physical activity

Walking programs can be an inexpensive and effective way to promote physical activity; employees connect with each other to walk before, during or after the workday. Programs can be formal or informal. Think about asking physically active employees to be mentors and lead daily walks.

Promotion – How have you been doing so far?

How often does your leadership promote places and programs in an effort for employees to be more physically active?

What channels of communication are used? Have you considered: memos, e-mails, notices in employee publications, all-employee voicemails, messages on monitors, staff meetings, union meetings, presentations to managers and/or regular messages from your senior leaders?

Putting it all together

Complete the Healthy Worksites physical activity checklist. Identify the “yes” answers. These are likely areas where your organization is already supporting employees in being more physically active. What about the “no” answers? Where can additional strategies be incorporated to improve upon what is already being offered? How effective has your promotion of these resources been to this point?

By looking at places, programs and promotion – your organization can develop a list of strengths (already in place) and opportunities (areas in need of more work).

Use this information to write an organization-wide policy for physical activity.

Write a policy for physical activity

The goal of a physical activity policy—whether developing a new policy or enhancing a current policy—is to make healthy choices the easy choices for your employees. Workers who receive this type of support are more likely to be physically active on their breaks, and employer support may influence workers’ activity during time *away* from work as well.

Places

Develop and identify places for employees to be physically active at or around the workplace, such as hallways, mapped walking routes, walking work station, fitness center, stairwells, bike racks, bike sharing program and more.

Time for physical activity

Allowing employees to use paid time to be physically active sends a strong message of support and encouragement. It also removes a major barrier – lack of time – to physical activity.

Dress code

Review your organization’s dress code. Does it allow employees to dress in a way that makes physical activity possible during the workday, that is, clothing and shoes that would allow for a 10- or 15-minute walk? If the dress code cannot provide for “walkable attire”, encourage employees to keep walking shoes at their desks or workstations.

Active meetings

Ask staff to hold standing or walking meetings. Good opportunities for walking meetings are meetings expected to last less than 30 minutes, have two or three attendees and involve discussion and/or creative thinking rather than presentations, handouts or note taking. Utilize indoor or outdoor walking routes.

The best way to encourage walking meetings is modeling, especially by upper management. If one leader starts holding occasional walking meetings, the practice will spread.

Sample policy #1

“Beginning September 1, 2013 all employees are required to receive an additional 15 minutes of paid break time each day to participate in physical activity. This time may be combined with the current lunch time (of 40 minutes) to accumulate 55 minutes of total break time. The additional 15 minutes of break time is designated for the purpose of participating in physical activity only. Employees who do not wish to use the extra time for physical activity are not eligible to take the extra break time.

Our organization supports the effective use of walking meetings. Walking meetings are most effective when there are three or fewer individuals involved and the topic doesn't require handouts or extensive note taking.

Staff must follow the current human resources dress code policy. However, employees are encouraged to keep a pair of walking shoes at their desks to allow for a walk break or walking meeting.

Senior leadership at our organization will provide information regarding physical activity opportunities at least quarterly to all employees.”

Sample policy #2

“Beginning September 1, 2011, facilities at School District <#> are available for employees to use before and after work. This includes the fitness center, weight room, running track, gyms, locker and shower facilities, and pool when not in use by a sports team. In addition, the school hallways are available for walking for employees and members of the community before school beginning at 7 a.m. and after school until 5:30 p.m. Members of the community will complete a waiver in the main office and receive a visitor card prior to first use of the hallways.

Sports teams that use facilities for practices will be given first priority, however, where it is feasible to share facilities, we will make every attempt to open facilities to employees during those instances. Signs will be clearly posted notifying staff of first priority usage.

In each school office, the school district has also made available maps that identify outdoor walking routes, including identification of paved community walking trails. These maps are available for staff and members of the community.

Senior leadership within our organization will provide information regarding physical activity opportunities at least quarterly to all employees. In addition, we will partner with Community Education to promote these options to the community.”

Policy Promotion

At least once each quarter, communicate with your employees about workplace opportunities for physical activity – places to be active, policies that support activity and programs that encourage physical activity. Use a variety of communication channels: memos, e-mails, notices in employee publications, all-employee voicemails, messages on monitors, staff meetings, union meetings, presentations to managers and regular memos or e-mails from your senior leaders.

Set a positive tone from the very beginning. The purpose of the policy and identification and availability of places is to support employees in being regularly active. Convey encouragement for physical activity. Be clear that you are creating improved *opportunities*, not a requirement, that employees be active. Reinforce the connection between employee health – including physical activity – and the success of your organization.