

Don't just sit there at work, stand up to stay alive

Research shows too much 'gluteus-maximus time' killing workers



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Are you sitting at your desk right now? If you are, get up!

Too much sitting during your workday can hamper your productivity, and it can also send you to an early grave.

The American Cancer Society this year reported that men and women who sat six hours or more a day were likely to die younger, and that was the case even if they were physically active. The risk for women was even higher.

"There are clear-cut health benefits of not sitting all day," said Alpa Patel, the main researcher on the study. It may also help concentration and productivity, she added.

"Anything that's height-adjustable is usually more expensive," said Jonathan Webb, a vice president with KI, a furniture company that makes adjustable desks costing upwards of \$1,000 each. He said the company has seen a 10 to 15 percent dropoff in sales of adjustable desks during the economic downturn.

"We have to educate our clients on what the payback is on purchasing a height-adjustable vs. a stagnant table," he said. "They can translate into higher employee retention and increased productivity, and in this economy employers are looking to do more with less."

Some employers already get it and think the payoff in productivity and morale outweighs the expense. Before Don Montanaro, CEO of online brokerage company TradeKing, moved his staff into a new office in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., this month he asked his 100 employees if there was anything they wanted for the new space. Ten said they wanted standing desks.

"It cost a few thousand more for the standing desks, but it's a small amount to invest to make employees more happy and healthy," said Montanaro, who has himself used a standing desk for 15 years. "They are smiling more, and they tell me they sleep better at night."

Sometimes workers just take matters into their own hands.

Richard Dirmyer, 25, hurt his back last year. Upon returning to work found he was unable to sit more than a few minutes without intense pain. He had to lie down to alleviate it.

Being new to the job as an institutional researcher for the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, he didn't want to work from home or take time off, so he took several empty computer boxes and set his computer, keyboard and monitor on top so he could stand and work. "It was the most comfortable position for me," he said.

Unfortunately, when the facilities manager went by his office and saw the rigged desk, he had Dirmyer take it down because it was unstable and he feared equipment would be damaged.

In the end, the employer decided to purchase an adjustable desk for about \$900. “There was really no budgetary hoops,” said Dirmyer. “My workplace was supportive of this.”

In some cases, the purchase of an adjustable desk, or giving employees regular breaks to stand up, could be requirements if a worker has a disability covered by the Americans With Disabilities Act and needs such accommodations to do his or her job.

But such tools or changes to working conditions are only mandated under the law if they don't pose a “significant difficulty or expense for the employer.”

For Dirmyer's employer, buying him an adjustable desk was a no-brainer.

“It's not just the law, or charity,” said the Institute for the Deaf's interim President James DeCaro. “It's the right thing to do and makes good business sense.”

Indeed, standing on the job may make you work harder.

A study by Miami University's Center for Ergonomic Research found that people who sit for long periods doing their workday took an average of 47 percent more breaks than their counterparts who stood to work. Breaks were typically longer for sitting workers, too.

Some companies are starting to use perks like adjustable desks as recruiting tools, said Donovan McNutt, president of GeekDesk, sellers of adjustable desks that retail for under \$800.

Despite the downturn, he said, there's growing interest in such desks. “It's not a luxury item anymore,” he noted. The biggest purchasers are companies in technology hubs such as San Francisco, but also smaller tech hubs such as Denver and Austin, he said. He has also seen a growing interest from government agencies and academia. In most cases, he continued, employers are buying desks when they outfit a new location, as opposed to replacing existing desks.

How sitting is killing you

The health benefits of not sitting for hours a day are compelling. The Cancer Society's research, which surveyed nearly 125,000 individuals, found:

Women who reported more than six hours per day of sitting were 37 percent more likely to die during the time period studied than those who sat fewer than three hours a day.

Men who sat more than six hours a day were 18 percent more likely to die than those who sat fewer than three hours per day.

The mortality rate was unchanged even when a person's physical activity level was considered.

Prolonged time spent sitting, independent of physical activity, has been shown to have important metabolic consequences, according to Alpa Patel, the main researcher on the Cancer Society's study, and may lead to obesity, cardiovascular problems and other chronic diseases.

An obvious solution to the problem, and one advocated by Patel, is providing workers with adjustable desks and allowing them to stand or sit throughout the day. That solution, however, is a hard sell in a tough economy when companies aren't spending as much and employees feel lucky to have desks at all.