



take a stand

Can you really exercise on the job? Linda Moon discovers a new workplace trend that is upping the ante.

Sitting at a desk for eight hours is increasingly being seen as a health risk, with some research suggesting it's "the new smoking".

In 2012 the University of Sydney's School of Public Health found that sitting for 11 hours a day increases your risk of dying prematurely by 40 per cent.

And if you think a daily jog around the block will negate that risk, think again. "Prolonged sitting is a risk factor for all causes of mortality, independent of physical activity," the study's authors wrote. So why is sitting so bad for us?

Muscular movement stimulates enzymes in our muscles responsible for siphoning fat and glucose out of the bloodstream. Prolonged sitting suppresses the activity of these enzymes, meaning excess fat and glucose is floating around our bloodstream with negative effects on our vascular and metabolic health.

The risks may increase if you're female. A 2010 US study of 120,000 people found women who spent six hours a day sitting had a 37 per cent increased risk of dying prematurely, compared to 17 per cent for men.

Standing desks and treadmills are a major workplace trend, according to

the business website Smart Company, and Australian employers now offering "active work environments" include the Heart Foundation, Commonwealth Bank, Flight Centre and Optus.

But how feasible is it to walk or stand while working?

The treadmill desk

After hearing about the health risks of sitting for prolonged periods, 42-year-old self-employed consultant Bri Williams swapped her regular desk for a treadmill desk. "I was tired of sitting all day. I work on my own so don't have as much incidental movement as others who might have to get up and go to meetings throughout the day."

Since buying the desk, Williams, of Mount Eliza in Victoria, clocks up an average of between 50 and 60 kilometres of walking each month while writing, typing and preparing presentations on her computer.

"I love it," she says. "It's an easy way of incorporating movement without having to set aside special time for it. It also reduces heating bills! I have it on one kilometre an hour and sometimes forget I'm even walking."

Williams reports less muscle stiffness and greater energy. But can she still work efficiently while walking?

"I find it better for focused work or routine tasks such as email, writing an article and researching, rather than conceptual work," she says. "If I have to bring lots of ideas together I find I need to lay it all out and not be moving."

When tired, Williams opts to stand or sit on the treadmill. "I believe you should go with how your body feels."

The standing desk

When Bill Sukala started work as a clinical exercise physiologist at Southern Cross University in 2011, he requested a standing workstation. "Everybody was walking by my office taking the piss," he recalls. By the time Sukala left that job he'd convinced 25 people to try standing while they work.

He admits standing all day isn't easy. "From a musculoskeletal standpoint it can be pretty hard. Some people say it's quite hard on their knees or hips."

Sukala says first-time standing workers need to take it easy. "In the beginning, do what you can tolerate.

"HAVE A STOOL HANDY FOR WHEN YOUR LEGS GET TIRED. YOU'RE NOT ACTUALLY MEANT TO STAND ALL DAY."

Do stand, but have a stool handy to use when your legs get tired. You're not actually meant to stand all day."

The good news, says Sukala, is that any muscular effort, including standing, is good. "If you're using a standing workstation and not even walking anywhere, the fact you don't collapse to the floor means your muscles are contracting to keep you upright."

"We've engineered physical activity out of our lives," he adds. "In caveman times, you had to sit down to take a break. Now we actually have to stand up to take a break."

"By using a standing desk, I felt a reversion to that time when, at the end of the day, it felt good to sit down."

The walking meeting

When 27-year-old Sydney business consultant Ray Corcoran holds a meeting he's more likely to be walking than chatting behind a desk. Corcoran has conducted more than 40 walking meetings in the past two years.

"I love them," he says. "You're not distracted while you're walking. It's just you, the other person and your ideas."

Corcoran typically conducts his walking meetings close to the clients' businesses. "It's a novelty to them initially," he says. "Once they've had a productive walking meeting, they end up being very excited to do them again."

He says groups of two or three people are ideal. "Bigger groups are awkward to manage. I've had walking meetings from five minutes to two hours. Fifteen to 20 minutes seems like the sweet spot."

Corcoran suggests walking meetings are particularly suitable for personal topics, tricky creative challenges and getting to know people. He also claims that they stimulate clearer thinking and a better flow of ideas.

"People are able to speak openly [away from their colleagues] and they are simply more enjoyable!" •