

06C SEDENTARY BEHAVIOUR

Key questions to ask

- Why should I address sedentary behaviour in my workplace?
- What can I do to address sedentary behaviour in my workplace?
- How do I know if our program has been a success?
- Where can I go for more information?



In this section of the Healthy Workplace Resource Toolkit, we look at how you can encourage your employees to sit less and move more during their working day.



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WHY SHOULD I ADDRESS SEDENTARY BEHAVIOUR IN MY WORKPLACE?

Sedentary behaviour is defined as any behaviour that requires very low energy expenditure, and does not increase energy levels above normal resting levels. With sedentary behaviour, the main posture is sitting or lying down, and it includes activities such as sleeping, sitting, watching television and playing seated computer games.¹ The terms 'sitting time' and 'sedentary time' are often used interchangeably but they both refer to sedentary behaviour.²

As a result of cars, computers, televisions, electronic games and modern workplace practices, prolonged sedentary behaviour has become a part of everyday life for most people.

The Australian Diabetes, Obesity and Lifestyle Study (2005) found that being sedentary was associated with higher blood sugar levels and blood fat levels, larger waist circumference, and an increased prevalence of metabolic syndrome (see text box below), even in those who regularly participated in moderate and vigorous physical activity. Furthermore, this study demonstrated that breaking up sedentary time (for example, to get a drink, answer the phone or simply stand up) was shown to be better for your health.^{4,5}

While public health campaigns often focus on increasing physical activity levels, evidence is emerging that shows sedentary behaviour is a distinct and independent risk factor for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, regardless of physical activity levels. Adults can meet or even exceed the national physical activity guidelines, yet if they sit for long periods, their health is still compromised.⁶

To put this into context for the workplace, even if your employees are physically active before and after work, if they sit down all day in the workplace they are still exposing themselves to significant health risks.

With almost half of Australians working in sedentary jobs, this is a very important issue to address in the workplace.

Metabolic syndrome (also called syndrome X or insulin-resistance syndrome) is a clustering of metabolic risk factors including abdominal obesity (a large waist circumference), high levels of blood fats and blood sugar, and high blood pressure.⁵



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Sedentary behaviour fast facts

- The National Health Survey 2007-2008 showed that 78% of adults spent between two and six hours a day sitting at leisure.³
- Almost half (45%) of Australians work in a sedentary-type job where they spend most of their time sitting.³
- An Australian study found that prolonged sitting increased the risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, even for people who met the recommended physical activity guidelines.⁴

For more information on sedentary behaviour, download the following resources from this CD-ROM or from the *Good health. Good business.* website at www.workcover.tas.gov.au/goodhealthgoodbusiness



To sit or stand? That is the question...

This fact sheet outlines the basics of sitting versus standing in a work environment.



Sitting less for adults

This fact sheet from the National Heart Foundation contains guidelines around sitting time for adults, including tips to reduce sitting time in the workplace.

WHAT CAN I DO TO ADDRESS SEDENTARY BEHAVIOUR IN MY WORKPLACE?

There are many ways you can encourage your employees to reduce their sedentary behaviour and break up their sitting time while at work.

For more information on sedentary behaviour in the workplace, download the following resources from this CD-ROM or from the *Good health. Good business.* website at www.workcover.tas.gov.au/goodhealthgoodbusiness



Sit-stand adjustable workstations

The use of standing workstations (or height-adjustable workstations) is becoming more widespread in the workplace. This is an effective way to provide opportunities for standing time. This fact sheet outlines some of the basic considerations to take into account when considering the implementation of standing workstations.



Physical activity policy

In some workplaces, sedentary behaviour can be addressed as part of a physical activity policy. This template will help you develop a physical activity policy for your workplace.



WHAT CAN I DO TO ADDRESS SEDENTARY BEHAVIOUR IN MY WORKPLACE?



Image courtesy of TasPorts

The following table lists examples of strategies and activities that may be useful for reducing sedentary behaviour in the workplace. Remember, aim for a mix of activities that target people, place and policy.

	Examples of activities targeting sedentary behaviour	People	Place	Policy
👍	Support mini physical activity breaks during work hours, such as standing when taking telephone calls, stretching and/or taking short walks			✓
👍	Set up office facilities that encourage breaks in sitting time, for example, ensure the printer is not close to the desk		✓	
👍	Encourage employees to walk around to colleagues in close proximity, rather than relying on email for communication	✓		
👍	Encourage standing or walking meetings			✓
👍	Encourage stop-and-stretch breaks on long driving commutes		✓	
👍	Include a stretch break on meeting agendas			✓
👍	Encourage employees to have lunch away from their desks	✓		
👍	Provide posters that prompt employees to stand up at regular intervals	✓		
👍+	Introduce a policy to reinforce desk breaks and support movement or standing at workstations and during meetings			✓
👍+	Provide software that encourages breaks in sitting time		✓	
👍+	Provide sit-stand adjustable workstations for employee use		✓	



This symbol indicates an easy or low-resource activity.



This symbol indicates a more comprehensively resourced activity.



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HOW DO I KNOW IF OUR PROGRAM HAS BEEN A SUCCESS?

The best way to find out if your initiatives to address sedentary behaviour have been a success is to look at the impact of any changes you have made to your worksite. It's a good idea to work out how you are going to do this early on, so you can ask the right questions and collect the right information.

It is essential to collect some information before you start, for example:

- the number of employees who currently have desk-based jobs
- the number of hours employees spend continuously sitting while at work (see text box at right)
- how many steps per day your employees take while at work (see text box at right)
- the availability of facilities and resources to support reduced sedentary behaviour (e.g. standing workstations, posters demonstrating short simple exercises to be performed at work).

This data will only be useful if it matches your program and objectives. For example, there is no need to measure employees' sitting time if your employees spend most of their day standing.

The baseline data you collect will be essential when you come to evaluate your program, as you can ask the same questions and see whether the results are different. Then you will be able to identify if your program has been effective, or whether you need to change your initiatives to provide better support to your employees.

There are many questions you can ask that will help you evaluate your program, including:

- Is there understanding and acceptance of your physical activity policy (if you have one)?
 - Are employees aware of the policy and its requirements?
 - Is there staff support for the policy?
 - Does your signage get your message across (e.g. do you have the right number and type of signs, and are they are still in place and legible)?

Measuring sedentary behaviour

Measuring sedentary behaviour can be as simple as:

- asking employees how many hours/minutes per day they spend sitting at work
- using direct observation
- using tools to measure activity.

Accelerometers are small, non-invasive electronic devices worn on the hip. They measure movement and allow researchers to examine patterns of physical activity and behaviour.⁵ Accelerometers are one of the most common tools used to measure sitting time.

Pedometers are small devices worn on the hip that measure the number of steps a person takes. They do this by detecting each time the person's heel strikes the ground. Pedometers can be calibrated to suit an individual's step length.



HOW DO I KNOW IF OUR PROGRAM HAS BEEN A SUCCESS?

- Are your employees making good use of the support offered as part of your program?
 - What is the level of employee participation in the sedentary behaviour initiatives offered?
 - How many employees have participated in the initiatives offered?
 - Is it always the same employees involved or is the program reaching a range of people?
- Can you see that employees have accepted the requirements of your policy and/or program?
 - Is there evidence of employees using the facilities provided (e.g. standing workstations)?
 - What are employees saying about the policy and the expectation that they will comply with its requirements?
- What has been the effect of the program on employees?
 - Has the number of hours employees spend continuously sitting while at work changed since implementation (needs baseline data)?
 - Has the number of breaks for sitting employees changed since implementation (needs baseline data)?
 - Are employees aware of sedentary behaviour signage/noticeboard information and does it influence their behaviour?
 - What do your employees think about the program (do they think it has been effective)?

How you collect this information will differ depending on your organisation's size and regional spread. There is a range of data collection methods that you could try, such as surveys, interviews and discussion groups.

For more information on evaluating your program, download the following resource from this CD-ROM or from the *Good health. Good business.* website at www.workcover.tas.gov.au/goodhealthgoodbusiness



A simple guide to evaluation



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WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

There are several organisations that can help you access specific information related to sedentary behaviour. These organisations, their contact details and the services they provide are listed below.

National Heart Foundation www.heartfoundation.org.au 1300 362 787	Provides information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ sedentary behaviour■ heart health■ events■ programs such as <i>Heartmoves</i> and <i>Heart Foundation Walking</i>.
Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute www.bakeridi.edu.au/SOSAtWork	Provides information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ research in relation to sedentary behaviour■ medical research with a focus on diagnosis, prevention and management of diabetes and cardiovascular disease.
Exertime program www.exertime.com	A software tool that encourages employees to sit less and move more during their work day.



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FURTHER READING

For more general information on sedentary behaviour, download the following resource from this CD-ROM or from the *Good health. Good business.* website at www.workcover.tas.gov.au/goodhealthgoodbusiness



Medibank Private: Stand up
Australia - Sedentary behaviour
in workers

REFERENCES

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6. Owen, N, Healy, GN, Matthews, CE and Dunstan, DW 2010, 'Too much sitting: The population health science of sedentary behaviour', *Exercise and Sport Science Reviews*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 105-113.



Image courtesy of Juicy Isle



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