



Australian Government

Comcare

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR REDUCING SEDENTARY WORK PRACTICES

This fact sheet provides information and guidance for human resources and work health and safety managers. Its purpose is to help workplaces develop a business case for reducing sedentary practices in the workplace.

THE FACTS ABOUT SEDENTARY PRACTICES

The research is clear—long periods of sitting have serious health consequences for workers:

- > on average, office workers sit for 76 per cent of the day¹
- > considerable evidence suggests that prolonged sitting increases the risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease and death^{2, 3}
- > people who sit for more than 11 hours a day have a 40 per cent increased risk of death in the next three years compared with people who sit for less than four hours⁴
- > workers who have been in sedentary roles for more than 10 years have double the risk of colon cancer²
- > prolonged sitting is an independent risk factor, even if you engage in regular exercise⁵
- > long periods of sitting are a suspected risk factor in the development of musculoskeletal disorders⁶
- > even short, regular breaks from sitting can be beneficial for workers' health³.

THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR WORKPLACES

Improved productivity

- > Reductions in sedentary practices lead to reduced risk of chronic diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. So by reducing sedentary work, workplaces are promoting a healthy workforce. Evidence suggests that healthy workers rate their work performance significantly higher than unhealthy workers⁷.
- > In a recent Comcare study, a reduction in sedentary work practices led to improvements in self-reported productivity. For more information on the Comcare research see [Stand up Comcare—promoting health by tackling sitting as a risk factor for chronic disease](#).

Reduced absenteeism

- > Sedentary work practices significantly increase the risk of chronic diseases. Workers with a chronic health condition, or who are experiencing injury or illness, are more likely to be absent from work. Absenteeism rates are increasing and are very costly for workplaces, with absenteeism costing Australian workplaces over \$7 billion each year⁷.

Reduced injury

- > Reduced sedentary practices can reduce the risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). MSDs are one of the most common types of worker injury and are very costly for workplaces. Costs that often result from MSDs include workers' compensation costs, lost work time, rehabilitation costs, worker replacement costs, presenteeism and work-overflow impacts for other workers in the team.



Talent attraction and retention

- > Workplaces that invest in worker health and wellbeing are more likely to attract and retain talent, as good health and wellbeing programs promote the health and engagement of the workforce. Workplaces often cite talent attraction and retention as a key driver for comprehensive health and wellbeing programs.

For more information about the evidence for investing in work health programs see [Benefits to business: the evidence for investing in worker health and wellbeing](#).

COST-EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS FOR WORKPLACES

There are a variety of cost-effective organisational, team and individual strategies that can be implemented in workplaces to reduce the risks associated with sedentary work practices. While the installation of sit-to-stand workstations encourages workers to stand up more often, these types of workstations are not necessary to promote more movement and less sitting.

Organisational strategies

- > Incorporate messaging to reduce sedentary work practices into organisational policies and procedures. For example, review your travel policy to ensure it promotes regular standing breaks during travel.
- > Revise the work environment and design, where possible, so it promotes workers to stand more often, making it easier for workers to make healthier choices.

Team strategies

- > Educate managers about the dangers of prolonged sitting and the various benefits of standing more often. Remind them of the importance of modelling behaviours—if workers see their managers standing more often it will encourage them to do the same.
- > Encourage managers to meet with their teams and brainstorm ways they can promote less sitting and more movement in their work. Encourage team members to support and remind one another to stand more often.

Individual strategies

- > Incorporate prompts into your work day that will remind you to stand more often. For example, some workers at Comcare stand up when they answer the phone.
- > Incorporate more incidental activity into your day. For example, stand on the train or take the stairs instead of the lift.

For more strategies that workplaces and workers can use to reduce sedentary work practices see [Benefits of movement—be upstanding!](#)

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- 1 Medibank Private. (2009). Stand Up Australia: Sedentary behaviour in workers.
 - 2 Boyle, T., Fritschi, L., Heyworth, J., & Bull, F. (2011). Long-term sedentary work and the risk of subsite-specific colorectal cancer, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 173, 1183-1191.
 - 3 Owen, N., Healy, G. N., Matthews, C. E., & Dunstan, D. (2010). Too much sitting: the population health science of sedentary behavior. *Exercise and sport sciences reviews*, 38(3), 105-113.
 - 4 Van der Ploeg, H. P., Chey, T., Korda, R. J., Banks, E., & Bauman, A. (2012). Sitting time and all-cause mortality risk in 222 497 Australian adults. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 172(6), 494-500.
 - 5 Katzmarzyk, P. T., Church, T. S., Craig, C. L., & Bouchard, C. (2009). Sitting time and mortality from all causes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, 41, 998-1005.
 - 6 World Health Organization. (2003). Preventing musculoskeletal disorders in the workplace. Protecting Workers' Health Series No 5.
 - 7 Medibank Private 2005, *The health of Australia's workforce*, 1 July 2011, retrieved from http://www.trenchhealth.com.au/articles/MEDI_Workplace_Web_Sp.pdf