

When bosses are exercise friendly, workers get their move on

February 28 2011, By Randy Dotinga



A new study reports that employees at exercise-friendly workplaces get more total moderate-to-vigorous physical activity than do others – a sign that bosses might be able to influence the fitness of their workers.

A study co-author brushed off a seemingly contradictory finding – employees in these workplaces were also more sedentary overall – and said the research shows the value of a variety of strategies to encouraging exercise.

“The more of these approaches that are used at your worksite, the more likely you were to be active,” said James Sallis, director of the Active Living Research program at San Diego State University. “If all you do is offer an aerobics class at the end of the day, they may not want to do

that. They've seen enough of their co-workers, so they want to do something else."

It might seem obvious that an exercise-friendly workplace would boost activity. Active employees, one might assume, would be healthier and their medical insurance would cost less.

In fact, researchers have found that exercise-friendly workplaces did not always directly result in workers who were more active, Sallis said. For example, he said, workplaces "started out putting in health clubs or fitness centers. Mainly what that did was get people to quit their old health clubs and use the free ones."

There are other approaches, like workplace team sports, exercise programs, changing facilities for workers who bike or jog to work, bicycle parking and even paid time off for [physical activity](#). (That last one, not surprisingly, is rare.)

In the new study in the March-April issue of the American Journal of Health Promotion, researchers surveyed 1,313 workers in the Seattle and Washington D.C.-Baltimore areas. Their average age was 45; three-quarters of participants were white; and, many were well off: more than half made more than \$70,000 a year.

The researchers found that employees at the most exercise-friendly workplaces got more total moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, measured by a device they wore for a week.

However, in a seemingly contradictory finding, those employees were also more sedentary overall. In other words, when they were not getting moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, they were more likely to be sitting around.

Sallis suspects that findings had more to do with the populations taking the survey. Exercise programs could be more common in white-collar workplaces where desk-bound employees do not get as much exercise on the job, he said.

Dr. Antronette K. Yancey, co-director of the UCLA Kaiser Permanente Center of Health Equity, said the study has caveats. For one, she said, it only suggests that workplace policies boost physical activity. It does not prove it.

In addition, she said, “those who are active recreationally may be attracted to worksites that have these kinds of policies.”

Yancey said the next step is to launch more studies that aim to better understand the effects of workplace policies regarding exercise. Will workplaces adopt them? Will [employees](#) become more active and stay that way?

For now, the study suggests that no one approach is the “magic bullet” to encourage fitness, co-author Sallis said. “Workplaces need to support people who want to be active on site and off site,” including those who might not want to see co-workers when they [exercise](#), he said.

“They need to support people who want to walk and bike to work, and those who want to go out for a jog or walk at the lunch hour and need to shower when they get back.”

More information: Crespo NC, et al. Worksite physical activity policies and environments in relation to employee physical activity. Am J Health Promo 25(4), 2011.

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