

Work, pedal, and be healthy

August 10 2015, by Sara Diedrich



ACT study. Credit: UI Department of Health and Human Physiology.

A new study from the University of Iowa finds that inspiring office employees to be active at work could be as easy as pedaling a bike—and they don't have to leave their desks.

By providing workers with a portable pedaling device under their desks, Lucas Carr, assistant professor of health and human physiology and member of the Obesity Research and Education Initiative at the UI, discovered that people who were once sitting all day were now moving at work without getting up.

Better yet, the study also found that workers who pedaled more were more likely to report weight loss, improved concentration while at work, and fewer sick days than co-workers who pedaled less.

But there's a catch.

Carr says key to the findings was providing workers with a pedaling device that was not only comfortable and easy to use, but was theirs alone to pedal.

"We wanted to see if workers would use these devices over a long period of time, and we found the design of the device is critically important," Carr says.

Another essential component was privacy. Place a high-end exercise bike or treadmill desk in the hall as a shared device, and very few employees will use them, Carr says.

"It's a great idea in theory, but it doesn't work over the long haul for most people."

Carr's study appeared this month in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. He also shared his findings this spring at the 2015 Society of

Behavioral Medicine's Annual Meeting in San Antonio, Texas.

Carr's 16-week pilot study was the third and longest in a series of studies he has conducted testing portable pedal machines among workers with sedentary jobs. His interest stems from growing evidence that people who sit all day—even if they're active outside of work—are at increased risk for serious health conditions such as multiple chronic diseases, poorer cognitive function, and mental distress.

To make matters worse, sedentary jobs have risen 83 percent since 1950 and currently account for 43 percent of all jobs in the United States, according to recent studies. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates 3.3 million people die annually due to physical inactivity, making it the fourth leading cause of mortality.

Carr's research over the years has found that the best way to get people moving at work is to change the environment in such a way that makes being active easier—a strategy his latest study shows can pay off for both employees and their employers.

"A lot of companies have gone the route of building expensive fitness facilities, that typically get used only by the most healthy employees," Carr says. "The people who need to improve their health the most are less likely to use worksite fitness facilities."

Carr says providing an employee with an option to be active right at their desk might be an effective way to improve the [health](#) of employees who are reluctant to exercise and could possibly reduce [health care costs](#) for employers.

"This is something that could be provided to just about any employee, regardless of the size of their company or office," he says. "It's right at their feet, and they can use it whenever they want without feeling self-

conscious in front of their co-[workers](#)."

In Carr's most recent study, 27 employees working at ACT, Inc., a company in Iowa City, volunteered to have an activeLife Trainer pedal device placed under their desk. An activity monitor connected to the pedaling devices tracked each participant's daily pedal time, which averaged 50 minutes a day over 16 weeks.

In addition, participants were sent three emails a week, providing them with tips for how to move more at work and reminders to shift their posture and stand on a regular basis.

At the end of the study, 70 percent of participants chose to keep their pedaling device—an unexpected response that gives Carr hope.

"We are really looking to identify sustainable solutions," he says. "That's what we are working towards—how do we help people engage in healthy behaviors that can be sustained over the long term."

Provided by University of Iowa

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