

New research suggests health education, Fitbits, and cabin workouts can improve activity levels for truck drivers

May 24 2022, by Meg Cox



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A targeted health program, including health education sessions, Fitbits, and lorry cabin workouts, can improve the activity levels of long-distance heavy goods drivers in the short term—according to new research led by Loughborough University.

Study lead Dr. Stacy Clemes hopes the results of the "Structured Health Intervention For Truckers' (SHIFT) randomized controlled trial, published today in *BMC Medicine*, will "lead to a policy-level change in driver training provision, and, in turn, lead to longer-term improvements in drivers' health and road safety."

There are approximately 300,000 heavy goods vehicle (HGV) drivers in the UK, but recently the industry has faced challenges with driver shortages and attracting new drivers. It is well established that HGV drivers are exposed to a number of health-related risk factors, such as [shift work](#) and long periods of sedentary behavior (sitting), which contribute towards [chronic conditions](#) such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease.

Dr. Clemes, in collaboration with colleagues from Loughborough University, the Diabetes Research Centre, University of Leicester, and University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, investigated whether HGV driver health could be improved using the specially designed SHIFT health program by recruiting and working with 382 long-distance HGV drivers from 25 transport sites in the Midlands, UK.

From January 2018, drivers were either assigned to a six-month SHIFT program (183 participants) or to a 'control arm' (199 participants)—which meant drivers received no intervention, therefore any changes as a result of the program could be observed.

Participants in the SHIFT arm of the trial received a six-hour education and health-behavior change session, had access to a health coach for

support, and were provided with a Fitbit to monitor activity levels and set goals. They were also introduced to a workout that they could follow in their lorry cabin and provided with resistance bands and balls. Participants were encouraged to maintain the health program for six months.

Findings

Participants in both arms of the trial were followed up six months and between 16 and 18 months later.

The researchers found:

- After six months, participants in the SHIFT program walked on average an additional 1,000 steps per day than the control group (equivalent to approximately 10 minutes of brisk walking)
- They also spent less time sitting per day than the [control group](#) (around 24 minutes less) and accumulated about six more minutes a day of moderate to vigorous activities
- However, the authors report no differences between the groups for other [health outcomes](#) such as fruit and vegetable intake, sleep duration or efficiency, or mental well-being
- The differences they did observe at six months were not apparent after sixteen to eighteen months—which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The authors conclude that, although the longer-term benefits of the SHIFT program are unclear, it should be incorporated into HGV driver training courses to promote activity and help improve the health of this key workforce.

"While HGV drivers undertake compulsory Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) training, this does not cover in detail lifestyle health

behaviors," Dr. Clemes explains.

"The SHIFT program has the potential to fill this void and to make an impact on drivers' activity, which in turn could have positive health benefits for all drivers."

"We now hope to work with HGV drivers, industry stakeholders, including training providers and regulators, to translate our 'SHIFT' program into a mandatory driver training module that will be accessible to UK HGV drivers."

"We hope that this work could lead to a policy-level change in driver training provision, and, in turn, lead to longer-term improvements in drivers' health and road safety."

"Over time we also hope to expand the SHIFT program, and our portfolio of health resources for drivers, by also incorporating elements focusing on sleep and diet, through further ongoing work in these areas."

Professor Thomas Yates, from the University of Leicester, added that "even small changes in walking, as little as five minutes a day, have a meaningful impact on the risk of developing a long-term chronic disease such as type 2 diabetes, so the changes observed in this study were hugely important and likely to meaningfully improve the longer-term [health](#) of the lorry drivers involved."

More information: Stacy A. Clemes et al, The effectiveness of the Structured Health Intervention For Truckers (SHIFT): a cluster randomised controlled trial (RCT), *BMC Medicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s12916-022-02372-7](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-022-02372-7)

Provided by Loughborough University

Citation: New research suggests health education, Fitbits, and cabin workouts can improve activity levels for truck drivers (2022, May 24) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-05-health-fitbits-cabin-workouts-truck.html>

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