

# Co-workers can influence healthy eating choices

November 16 2022

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Scientists from Cologne and Utrecht have found that employees are more likely to eat fruit and vegetables as well as engage in physical activity when their colleagues encourage a healthy lifestyle. Also, employees' healthy eating behavior is positively correlated with their colleagues' fruit and vegetable consumption.

However, if one colleague exercises a lot, this does not prompt others to emulate him or her. Thus, regarding [physical exercise](#), explicit [encouragement](#) has a positive effect, but employees do not tend to model their behavior on that of other co-workers who are physically more active.

The scientists conclude that overall, colleagues' encouragement and own healthy behaviors have the potential to contribute to creating a culture of health at the workplace and support all employees in making healthy choices.

The study was conducted by Professor Dr. Lea Ellwardt at the University of Cologne's Institute of Sociology and Social Psychology (ISS) and Anne van der Put from the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Utrecht University. Their article "Employees' healthy eating and physical activity: the role of colleague encouragement and behavior" has been published in *BMC Public Health*.

Exercising and [healthy eating](#) are not just individual choices, they are influenced by family members, friends, or neighbors. Little is known, however, about the role of co-workers, who are another important interpersonal influence. People spend many hours at work, surrounded by mostly the same colleagues, who could therefore significantly shape employees' (un)healthy choices.

The scientists studied to what extent colleagues may play a part in one another's eating and exercise behaviors by focusing on two pathways: colleagues can encourage a healthy lifestyle or act as [role models](#) whose behaviors can be observed and copied.

The team used the European Sustainable Workforce Survey, with data on 4345 employees in 402 teams in 113 organizations. "Our study showed that employees are more likely to eat fruit and vegetables as well

as engage in physical activity when their colleagues encourage a [healthy lifestyle](#)," said Ellwardt.

Contrary to their expectations, however, van der Put and Ellwardt found a negative correlation between employees' and colleagues' physical activity where no explicit encouragement was involved. "One explanation for our negative result may be that physical activity typically takes place outside working hours, where it is hardly visible to colleagues," Ellwardt said. People eat often at work every day together with colleagues, whereas [physical activity](#) takes place privately, making it less prone to [social influence](#).

The study takes into consideration both colleagues' encouragement and their actual behaviors, addressing encouragement specific to the behavior rather than generic social support, and examining behaviors that also take place outside the workplace.

Ellwardt explained, "The study is one of the first to address the role of co-workers' behaviors using a network approach incorporating direct colleagues. This allowed for a more finely grained analysis than the aggregation of individual-level measures or relating employees who may not work in close proximity."

Overall, colleagues' encouragement and own healthy behaviors have the potential to contribute to creating a culture of health at the workplace and support all employees in making healthy choices. The authors believe this makes it promising for managers and public health policy makers to consider.

"Our study implies that when designing health interventions, it is important to incorporate the [work environment](#) alongside other social actors such as partners, family members, and friends. Colleagues are relevant sources of social support when it comes to healthy behaviors

and can act as role models," Ellwardt said.

Crucially, not only do colleague encouragement and behaviors contribute to creating a culture of health in the workplace, they also indirectly support the entire work population, including those not using dedicated programs at the workplace.

Future research would benefit from using longitudinal data to examine influence processes over time, the authors believe. Since individuals internalize cues from their environment to shape their [intrinsic motivation](#), this research could show how long it takes a new [employee](#) to adapt to current workplace health norm.

**More information:** Anne van der Put et al, Employees' healthy eating and physical activity: the role of colleague encouragement and behaviour, *BMC Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-022-14394-0](#)

Provided by University of Cologne

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