

Working in an office can harm your health—depending on where it is and the length of your commute

May 4 2023, by Jaana Halonen and Auriba Raza



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In the past year, a growing number of companies have asked employees to return to the office either full- or part-time after years of pandemic-induced remote working. While this is a good thing when it comes to being able to socialize with your colleagues, it may have some negative

effects on your health—depending on how long your commute is.

Our research project, completed in late 2022, found that a [lengthy commute](#) to work is associated with being less physically active, being overweight, and having sleep problems. And, depending on [where your office is located](#), you may also be more likely to drink in excess.

To conduct our research, we obtained data from the [Swedish Longitudinal Survey of Health](#), using waves conducted between 2012 and 2018. We looked at responses from approximately 13,000 participants aged 16-64 on a range of topics—including their lifestyle (for example, how often they exercised, if they drank or smoke, and their weight), their occupation, how stressed they were about work, and whether they had any pre-existing [health](#) conditions.

We also looked at the distance between a participant's home and their workplace, and the socioeconomic status of these areas, to understand how these factors affected the lifestyle habits. We used repeated surveys, which allowed us to compare each study participant's responses at two different points in time.

We found that commutes of more than 3km increased the likelihood of being physically inactive and overweight, and of having [poor sleep](#). People who worked more than 40 hours and commuted more than five hours each week were more likely to be physically inactive and experience sleep problems, compared with times when they only [commuted one-to-five hours a week](#). This may be due to having little time to exercise, or through stress making it difficult to sleep.

Our analyses also showed that participants were more likely to have harmful drinking habits—such as feeling they needed to cut down, or drinking first-thing in the morning either to steady their nerves or cope with a hangover—when their workplace was in a [high socioeconomic](#)

[status area](#). We also found that when a person's workplace was [located near a bar](#), they were more likely to have harmful drinking habits.

These results were true even when we took into account various factors that may have affected them—such as a person's age, their history of chronic diseases, whether they had any mental health conditions (such as depression), and their occupation.

Where to work

While it's clear from our results that where you work can have a big effect on many aspects of your health, we weren't able to define a perfect commuting distance or office location based on our findings.

But, in terms of [physical activity](#) levels, we were able to show that participants who commuted 3km or less appeared to be more physically active. This could be because this distance made it easier to commute by bicycle or foot to work—or because a shorter commute gave participants time before and after work to exercise.

But the results were not as clear when it comes to weight, sleep, and drinking habits. Thus, it will be important to investigate these factors, alongside whether our results are similar for people living in different regions of the world, since our study was only conducted on people in Sweden.

And although our research project uncovered these links between a person's workplace and certain health habits, we didn't look at all the reasons that might explain these relationships. It will be important for future studies to further investigate why these links exist.

Things you can do

Our findings highlight just how great an effect the location of your workplace can have on your lifestyle and health. These may be important to bear in mind the next time you're thinking of changing jobs or moving.

They also show how important it is to plan and develop cities that take various aspects of residential life into account. For example, if people can commute more easily using [public transport](#) or by cycling, wheeling or walking, they may find it easier to be physically active and maintain a healthy weight. Limiting access to alcohol both near home and work may also reduce [alcohol consumption](#) and the health issues associated with harmful drinking.

But while a lengthy commute can have negative health consequences, that doesn't mean there aren't still many things you can do to ensure it doesn't affect your health too much.

Using [active travel](#) where possible is one way to get more physical activity into your day. This may also have the knock-on effect of helping you [maintain a healthy weight](#) alongside being [environmentally friendly](#). And, if you're someone who likes to go [drinking](#) with colleagues after work, consider sometimes opting for mocktails instead.

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