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to get moving. All you really need is 10 minutes, but 20 minutes (or even 30) would be terrific. Instead of being tempted by dessert in a local restaurant or employee cafeteria, going shopping to give yourself a reward, or staying at your desk to eat because you feel overwhelmed by work, you can use part of your lunch break for activities that will invigorate your body and mind—without leaving you limp.

“Increasing numbers of women are now bringing a comfortable pair of walking shoes to work with them, so when they can walk a bit during the day, the shoes are ready,” says Abby C. King, PhD, professor of health research and policy and professor of medicine, Stanford University School of Medicine. “Taking walking breaks... especially for 10 or more minutes at a time, is a great way to promote health benefits without becoming unduly sweaty.”

Does it work?

You can improve your fitness level and reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease with as few as five 15-minute exercise breaks each week. These shorts sessions of moderately intense exercise (a brisk pace equivalent to walking a mile in 15 to 20 minutes) might not seem like much, but they add up.

Brief exercise breaks fit well into many work schedules and bring healthful results. One Wisconsin on-the-job activity program enrolled employees ranging in age from 19 to 66—nearly all of them women—and gave them a map of walking routes near their place of employment. Overall, regardless of how fit they were when they started the 16-week program, the employees lowered their heart rates, blood pressure and BMI (body mass index) readings. Other workplace walking projects have also shown reductions in blood glucose (an indicator of diabetes), total cholesterol and fatigue, as well as boosts in mood, nutrition, job satisfaction, work efficiency and general health.

Programs to encourage workers to become more active are springing up all over, fueled by the research that shows positive health effects from short bouts of exercise. Some workplaces, such as university campuses, have natural areas for walking. Other job sites pose challenges, both environmental and personal.

You know that woman in your neighborhood who’s out running at 5:30 a.m., no matter what the weather? Or your co-worker who heads off to the gym after work every day?

Well, that’s great for them, but in the real world, most of us can’t find a block of time for a daily exercise session. Lack of time is one of the most common reasons for quitting regular exercise, or not starting physical activity at all.

You can avoid that obstacle more easily than you might think. Instead of just feeling guilty (and out-of-shape) and wishing you had more time for fitness before or after work, how about getting that much-needed activity while you’re on the job? And, no, you don’t have to switch careers to do it, or show up looking sweaty at your 1 p.m. meeting.

You’ll benefit from the improved health and lower stress that goes with regular exercise by using part of your lunch time

“People have been creative in finding places, both indoors and outdoors, to get in more physical activity throughout their workday,” says King. Some walk in hallways or staircases as well as outside, or join with “walking buddies” or teams in order to stick with a regular schedule and keep motivation up. “The goal is to find what works for you,” she adds, “knowing that changes in schedules, stress, or other things can change what works best for you.”

When do I eat lunch?

If you’re walking around the corporate office park during your lunch break, will you still have time to eat? Yes, which is part of the beauty of using only 10 to 30 minutes for exercise.

Try to exercise first, then eat lunch. Exercising right after a meal “is not a good solution, since a full stomach will put extra stress on your heart and circulation,” advises Harvey B. Simon, MD, associate professor of medicine, Harvard Medical School, in his book, “The No-Sweat Exercise Plan.”

You may have more stamina for lunchtime exercise if you have a healthy mid-morning snack to curb your hunger and give you more energy. In addition, exercising before eating

“may serve as a cue to not overeat at lunch, or to eat sensibly,” Dr. King says.

Lunch can also become your reward for having done some physical activity, which is okay so long as your lunch is nutritious. A post-exercise reward of a thick slice of cheesecake will easily undo the benefits of that day’s effort (and the next few days’ as well!).

How can I speed things up?

Once you’ve added exercise to your lunch break several times a week, you might want to find other ways to add calorie-burning activity to your workday. Here are a few suggestions:

- Hold walking meetings. When it’s just you and one or two co-workers, why not walk and talk? Walking meetings help stretch your muscles and add oxygen to discussions.
- Stand. Research shows that mildly obese people sit, on average, for two hours longer each day than lean people do. When scientists designed a standing desk that incorporated a computer workstation with a treadmill, they found that obese office workers could lose 44 to 66 pounds a year by using the special desk for two to three hours a day. It’s simple: Standing burns more calories. So, when it’s possible, stand while you’re on the phone, talking with a co-worker, or even eating lunch.
- Make yourself move. Send documents to a printer that’s not near your desk. Walk to a colleague’s office for a discussion rather than sending email. When commuting, get off one stop early and walk the rest of the way to your job, or park in a distant lot.
- Keep track of how you’re doing. “Regular self-monitoring of your exercise may be the single most important thing one can do to stay on track,” says Dr. King. “Use a calendar, electronic scheduling device, or step-counting pedometer to log your achievements.”

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