

Employer schemes to encourage walking to work

SOURCE: National Institute for Health Research

(<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK279724/pdf/TOC.pdf>)

1. Physical inactivity increases the risk of many chronic diseases, including coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity and some cancers. It is currently recommended that adults should aim to undertake at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity in bouts of 10 minutes or more throughout the week. There are concerns that many adults in the UK and other high-income countries do not achieve this although allowing for the accumulation of 150 minutes in bouts of 10 minutes has led to an estimated 61% of adults in England self-reporting that they do achieve the recommended levels. Increasing physical activity levels, particularly among the most inactive, is an important aim of current public health policy in the UK.

2. In addition, there is increasing interest in the relationship between time spent sedentary (defined as any waking sitting or lying behaviour with low energy expenditure [≤ 1.5 metabolic equivalent of task (METs)] and health outcomes. A large amount of time spent sitting has been associated with greater risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular and all-cause mortality. In addition, a high volume of objectively measured sedentary time has been associated with a poorer metabolic profile in healthy adults and those at risk of and having developed type 2 diabetes. It is of note that these associations are independent of the volume of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA), and consequently UK health guidelines recommend that adults should minimise the amount of time spent sedentary (sitting) in addition to increasing physical activity.

3. There is evidence of the link between adult obesity levels and travel behaviour, one indicator of which is that the countries with the highest levels of active travel generally have the lowest obesity rates. Walking has been described as near-perfect exercise. It is a popular, familiar, convenient and free form of exercise that can be incorporated into everyday life and sustained into older age. It is also a carbon-neutral mode of transport that has declined in recent decades in parallel with the growth in car use. Even walking at a moderate pace of 5 km/hour (3 miles/hour) expends sufficient energy to meet the definition of moderate intensity physical activity. Hence there are compelling reasons to encourage people to walk more, not only to improve their health but also to address the problems of climate change.

4. In the UK, there are substantial opportunities to increase walking by replacing short journeys undertaken by car. For example, the 2011 National Travel Survey showed that 22% of all car trips were shorter than 2 miles in length, while 18% of trips of less than 1 mile were made by car. An opportunity for working adults to accumulate the recommended moderate activity levels is through the daily commute, and, in addition, replacing the car for short journeys is likely to reduce sedentary time. Experts in many World Health Organization (WHO) countries agree that significant public health benefits can be realised through greater use of active transport modes. Furthermore, cost-benefit analysis for the UK Department for Transport suggests that the ratio of benefits to costs is high.