

Exercise at Your Desk

This at-work workout can help fit fitness into your schedule



These days, it seems like everyone is working more hours and using the old “no-time-to-exercise” excuse more than ever. But what if you could actually work out at work?

While you won't get to the Olympics this way, you can do stretching, muscle-strengthening, and even short stints of aerobic exercises right at your desk (or maybe in a vacant conference room or stairwell). After all, doctors say any amount of exercise helps -- the benefits are cumulative.



“We are made to move, not sit at a desk 12 hours a day,” says Joan Price, author of *The Anytime, Anywhere Exercise Book*. “As ergonomic as your desk or chair may be, sitting produces back pains, headaches, and listlessness. You become less productive.”

Not to mention less ... er, thin. The U.S. surgeon general recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate activity five days a week. Yet most Americans don't approach this level of activity. You know who you are: You are the woman who's so stiff when she gets up from her desk that she walks like a robot for the first few steps. You are the man with repetitive motion injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome. You are the person who vies for the “rock star” parking place closest to the door.

But come on -- can you actually go beyond working out the kinks and get some meaningful exercise in your cubicle?

Kelli Calabrese, MS, an exercise physiologist and spokesman for the American Council on Exercise, says yes. Calabrese believes in 60-second or 10-minute bursts of aerobic exertion. “This is cardio -- if you get in your [target] heart rate zone,” she says.

60-Second Aerobics

Calabrese says that improving your heart rate variability -- your heart's ability to jump from resting to “pumped” -- has been shown to increase longevity and decrease heart disease risk.

While you shouldn't give up on your home or gym exercise routine, you can certainly supplement it with exercises done at your desk (and, on those extra-long workdays, it's much better than doing nothing.) Here are a few aerobic tricks to try during your next break between tasks:

- Glance at the wall clock and rip off a minute's worth of jumping jacks. If you're a beginner, try the low-impact version (raise your right arm and tap your left toe to the side while keeping your right foot on the floor; alternate sides)
- Do a football-like drill of running in place for 60 seconds. Get those knees up! (Beginners, march in place.)
- Simulate jumping rope for a minute: Hop on alternate feet, or on both feet at once. An easier version is to simulate the arm motion of turning a rope, while alternately tapping the toes of each leg in front.
- While seated, pump both arms over your head for 30 seconds, then rapidly tap your feet on the floor, football-drill style, for 30 seconds. Repeat 3-5 times.
- If you can step into a vacant office or conference room, shadow box for a minute or two. Or just walk around the room as fast as you can.
- Or do walk-lunges in your office or a vacant room. (You could also amuse your co-workers by doing these in the hall; remember Monty Python's “Ministry of Silly Walks” comedy routine?). Set your PDA to beep you into action. No conference room? Take to the stairs -- two at a time if you need a harder workout! Do this 5-7 times a day.

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Want Something Less Breathless?

Afraid the phone will ring and you'll sound like a lion is chasing you? Price's book has more than 300 less dramatic -- but equally beneficial -- exercises. "I call these fitness minutes," she says.

Some strength-building suggestions:

- Do one-legged squats (hold onto a wall or table for support) while waiting for a web page to load, the copier to spit out your reports, or faxes to slither out.
- Stand with one leg straight and try to kick your buttocks with the other.
- Sitting in your chair, lift one leg off the seat, extend it out straight, hold for 2 seconds; then lower your foot (stop short of the floor) and hold for several seconds. Switch; do each leg 15 times.
- To work your chest and shoulders, place both hands on your chair arms and slowly lift your bottom off the chair. Lower yourself back down but stop short of the seat, hold for a few seconds. Do 15 times.
- To stretch your back and strengthen your biceps, place your hands on the desk and hang on. Slowly push your chair back until your head is between your arms and you're looking at the floor. Then slowly pull yourself back in. Again, 15 of these.
- Desk pushups can be a good strengthener. (First, make sure your desk is solid enough to support your weight.) Standing, put your hands on the desk. Walk backward, then do push-ups against the desk. Repeat 15 times.



Reach for the Sky

Stretching exercises are a natural for the desk-bound, to ease stress and keep your muscles from clenching up. Here are a few suggestions:

- Sitting tall in your chair, stretch both arms over your head and reach for the sky. After 10 seconds, extend the right hand higher, then the left.
- Let your head loll over so that your right ear nearly touches your right shoulder. Using your hand, press your head a little lower (gently, now). Hold for 10 seconds. Relax, and then repeat on the other side.
- Try this yoga posture to relieve tension: Sit facing forward, then turn your head to the left and your torso to the right, and hold a few seconds. Repeat 15 times, alternating sides.
- Sitting up straight, try to touch your shoulder blades together. Hold, and then relax.
- You get to put your feet up for this one! To ease the hamstrings and lower back, push your chair away from your desk and put your right heel up on the desk. Sit up straight, and bend forward just until you feel a gentle stretch in the back of your leg. Flex your foot for a few seconds, and then point it. Bend forward a little farther, flex your foot again, and hold for 10 seconds. Repeat on the other side.



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Unobtrusive but Effective

If the boss wonders why your feet are on the desk, what about some invisible exercises?

Women can do kegels -- tightening and holding, then loosening, their pelvic floor muscles (the muscles that control the flow of urine when you go to the bathroom). This will prevent leakage and other problems down the line.

Butt clenches are also helpful in today's booty-conscious society. Tighten your buttocks, hold, hold, hold, and then relax. Repeat 15 times. The same goes for ab squeezes -- just tighten your tummy muscles instead.

Use Every Minute Actively

Whenever possible, "stand rather than sit," Price says. "Walk rather than stand."

- Walk during your lunch break. If you find that boring, buy a camera and walk around taking pictures. Some experts say it's ideal to walk 10,000 steps a day -- this can be five miles, depending on the length of your stride. "Buy a pedometer, wear it five days, and divide by five," Price suggests. "If you're nowhere near 10,000 -- and this takes some doing -- set a reasonable goal. If you clocked 2,000 steps, go for 2,500."
- Join a gym near your office and go during your lunch hour. If your employer provides a gym, that's even better.
- Forget emailing the guy three cubes over -- walk.
- Remember, walks to the vending machine don't count!

Calabrese often calls her fitness-coaching clients or emails them to remind them they had planned to work out or walk at lunch. You can do the same -- put a reminder on your desk calendar, a sticky note on your computer, or send yourself an e-mail reminder.

One last thing: Don't let fear of embarrassment keep you from exercising at work. Chances are, your co-workers will admire your efforts rather than be amused. You might even get them to join you on a lunchtime walk or to help you lobby for lunch-hour yoga classes at your workplace.

So what should you do if one of your co-workers, say, finds you in your chair two feet from the desk, stretched out, staring at the floor? "You could pretend you dropped a pen," Price laughs. "But it's better to say, 'This feels great! Try it.'"



Source: Lawrence, Jean. "Exercise at Your Desk," WebMD.com