Active offices: Can office work be designed to be less sedentary and more health promoting?

Leon Straker,
School of Physiotherapy and Exercise Science, Curtin University, Perth, WA, AUSTRALIA

1. Abstract

The physical loads associated with performing work have changed for many workers. Proportionally more people are now working in industry sectors that are characterized by predominantly sedentary tasks. Furthermore, industry sectors that previously contained many tasks with heavy physical loads have undergone a transition to more sedentary tasks, because of both successful health and safety interventions and mechanization to increase productivity. Sedentary work, such as office jobs and computer work in particular, is associated with low physical stresses including low levels of muscle activity, circulatory demands and energy expenditure. Whilst sedentary jobs have been traditionally thought of as safe, low risk jobs, recent evidence suggests that work involving long bouts of uninterrupted periods of sitting may be hazardous. Thus excessive occupational sedentary exposure may be detrimental to health as insufficient physical stress is known to have short and long term detrimental health effects. Excessive sedentary exposure may be contributing substantially to the growing chronic disease burden associated with obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders and some cancers.

Given the growing exposure to sedentary work, and the growing evidence base on the health consequences of excessive sedentary exposure, occupational sedentary exposure has been identified as an emerging occupational issue. Interventions are being trialled within workplaces to evaluate whether work can be designed to promote more activity and less sedentariness. Laboratory studies are examining mechanisms for health impacts and also cognitive impacts of prolonged sedentary work. Epidemiological studies are refining the scope of the problem. Employers and occupational health and safety authorities are working to provide safe systems of work for workers with currently high occupational sedentary exposure. This symposium will provide a review of the state of the art for minimising the hazards associated with excessive occupational sedentary exposure.