

Sitting on the job slows women down

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Do you sit long hours on the job day in and day out? And after that long day of sitting, do you choose to skip that much-needed workout? If you are one of these people, you might want to step back and consider how this decision may be affecting your health.

Studies show that exercise helps ward off chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Researchers from the National Institute of Environmental Health Science have discovered, however, that many people, especially women, are choosing to skip the workouts. In “Leisure-time physical activity in relation to occupational physical activity” (*Preventive Medicine*, in press), Christine C. Ekenga, Christine G. Parks, Lauren E. Wilson, and Dale P. Sandler surveyed a subgroup of 26,334 women participants from the Sister Study, a National Institutes of Health study of nearly 51,000 women, ages 35 to 74, whose sisters had breast cancer. (At least 72 percent of the women in the Sister Study were age 50 or older.) All members of the subgroup had been employed in their current job for at least a year. In their research, Ekenga and her coauthors analyzed the relationship between the participants’ leisure-time physical activities and occupational physical activities and found some important connections.

As part of the analysis, participants provided information on age, race/ethnicity, income, region of residence, education, and body mass index (BMI). To measure the women’s level of physical activity at work, the authors asked them to describe their “usual physical activity while on the job,” and then categorized it as sitting, standing, or manually active. Standing included both standing and sitting equally or primarily standing, and manually active included constant walking or physical labor.

The women also listed the weekly leisure-time physical activities they had participated in during the past 12 months, giving the length, type, and frequency of activity. On the basis of these data, the authors categorized the leisure-time physical activity into three areas following the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines: insufficient, moderate, and high.

After comparing the data through the use of regression models, the authors found a relationship between more exercise during leisure time and ethnicity, education, higher income, and lower BMIs. The authors’ most important finding regarding work was that the levels of women’s physical activity on the job and after work are related—women who sit (or stand still) more exercise less. Many women with sedentary jobs, therefore, are not meeting the required levels of activities that help them to maintain good health. This study cannot infer causality—for instance, it’s possible that women who are less physically able may purposely choose sedentary jobs. Nonetheless, the authors can conclude that further research is needed to develop ways to help individuals—this really includes everyone, not just women—increase physical activities both on and off the job.