



TravelSmart Workplace fact sheet Employee health and active travel

Research indicates that people who are physically active in their daily lives are more productive in the workplace and have better attendance records⁽¹⁾. It is therefore in the direct interest of employers to enable their staff to be more active.

Staff exercise programs have been shown to have many benefits for workplaces, but often appeal most to people who are already making time for exercise in their day and require an extra commitment in the schedule. A complementary approach to exercise programs is to provide support and facilities for staff to build exercise into their daily lives by choosing active travel options.

What is active travel?

Active travel (or active transport) can include any travel mode that involves physical activity including walking, cycling, and any incidental activity associated with the use of public transport.

Choosing to walk, cycle or catch public transport for work trips turns a commute into a multipurpose activity: travel and daily exercise.

Active travel modes offer a convenient and accessible option and are a highly effective way to integrate incidental exercise into the work day. Staff can achieve their recommended levels of daily physical activity without committing to additional activities outside their normal routine.

Why the workplace?

Choosing an active mode for the commute and for business trips during the day provides a significant proportion of the working population with the opportunity to be active on a regular basis, directly benefitting the individual, the business and the wider community.

Active travel matters in the workplace. Think about how much time we spend in the workplace as well as getting to and from it.

The workplace is an ideal setting to improve people's health because employers can promote an active lifestyle by supporting staff to include physical activity in their day.



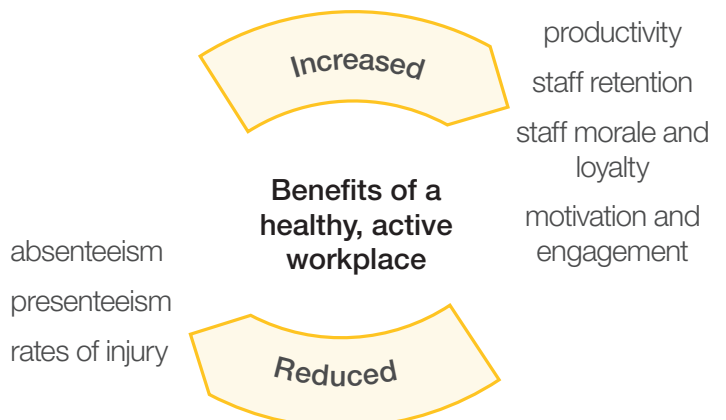
So why do it?

Every good employer knows the importance of a healthy and motivated workforce.

Poor employee health can significantly increase employer costs through a reduction in employee performance and productivity, more frequent absenteeism, higher accident and injury rates and associated rehabilitation and compensation costs^(2,3,4).

Healthier employees really can mean better business outcomes.

Employers who support their staff to adopt healthy behaviours can advance their corporate image and gain a reputation as a great place to work and improve their bottom line through⁽²⁾:



Physical activity

What is physical activity?

Physical activity is any muscle movement which increases energy expenditure. Physical activity includes the 'exercise' which is usually planned, structured and repetitive and performed recreationally to improve fitness levels.

Transport to work (active travel), activity performed at work and other incidental activity (e.g. activity associated with everyday tasks, such as housework) can be important components of overall daily physical activity.

Why be active?

Physical inactivity is linked to poor health and is costly to individuals and the community.



In Australia, physical inactivity is the 2nd most preventable cause of ill health and death (following tobacco).

It costs \$13 billion^(2,5) and 13,000 lives each year.⁽⁶⁾

Having a physically inactive lifestyle is a major risk factor for many chronic diseases including coronary heart disease, stroke, obesity and type 2 diabetes. It is also associated with mental health problems, including depression, stress and anxiety^(5,7,8).

Participation in regular physical activity can help to:

- control body weight, blood pressure and cholesterol
- improve physical conditioning and augment energy and stamina
- improve strength, flexibility, balance, coordination and reaction times
- improve mental and cognitive function by enhancing mood, alertness, concentration and memory and reducing depression, stress and anxiety
- augment the capacity to cope with stress and anxiety and impart resilience
- improve quality of life, self-esteem and self-confidence
- increase the quality of sleep
- reduce the risk of injury and falls
- expand social connectivity through more time with friends and family, the opportunity to meet new people and greater involvement with the local community^(5,7,8).



People aren't active enough

Despite the well-established importance and profound benefits of regular physical activity for good health, only 60% of adult Western Australians are sufficiently active, with 28% insufficiently active and 12% entirely sedentary (meaning they sit down almost all day)⁽⁷⁾.

Physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour are independent risk factors for developing overweight and obesity. Currently, 61% of Australian adults are classified as overweight or obese and at a higher risk of developing certain chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes⁽⁵⁾.

These statistics indicate that it is likely that your employees are not as healthy as they could be, which can affect their performance at work. Promoting active travel to and from the workplace is one way that employers can positively influence the health and productivity of employees.

What is 'sufficient' physical activity?

How much do you need?

**30 minutes
5 times a week**

The National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australian adults state that 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity performed on most, preferably all, days of the week is sufficient to result in health benefits (150 minutes per week)⁽⁹⁾.

This amount of physical activity can be attained in shorter bouts throughout the day, such as two 15 minute sessions or three 10 minute⁽⁵⁾ bouts, which is perfectly suited to active travel.

Active travel

Today's lifestyle in Australia encourages low activity levels, with work and leisure activities becoming more sedentary and high levels of car dependency, even for short trips that could easily be made by a more physical mode.

Choosing to walk, cycle or catch public transport to work (or at least for part of the journey to work), provides people with the opportunity to include regular physical activity in their working day, no matter their physical, time or economic constraints.



Free, easy and not requiring any special equipment, **walking** is one of the most accessible forms of healthy activity.

People can walk 1km in about 10 minutes.



Daily **cycling** delivers significant health benefits including reduced risk of chronic disease and improved fitness and weight control.

People can cycle 5km in about 15 minutes.



People who travel to and from work by **public transport** walk substantial distances to and from transit stations, on average **gaining 13 minutes physical activity for every trip.**⁽¹¹⁾

"No time" to be active

Around 40% of Western Australians are not active enough for good health and research suggests that many people would like to be more physically active, but feel that they simply do not have time in their day-to-day lives⁽¹⁰⁾. This is a very significant barrier to fitness programs as people see them as something extra they need to fit into their busy schedules and why travelling active can be a great option.



Active travel as part of the working day

Active travel can positively impact on health and wellbeing, particularly because it helps people embed physical activity into their daily routines.

An increase in physical activity of more than an hour per week, such as walking and cycling to work, can yield a measurable reduction in absenteeism⁽¹¹⁾.

People who commute to work via public transport have been shown to walk 13 minutes on average for each trip. So public transport use adds to physical activity levels too⁽¹¹⁾.

Even a modest 5% increase in the proportion of the population performing 30 minutes of moderate activity each day, such as through active travel, could save approximately 600 Australian lives and millions of dollars to the health care system annually (whilst also improving national productivity)⁽¹²⁾.

For every kilometre an employee covers in active travel, \$0.376 is saved on annual health care costs (not to mention the \$16 - \$43 saved on the daily cost of driving!)⁽¹³⁾.

Enabling employees to make physical activity part of their normal working day is therefore not only an investment in a healthier, more active community, but in turn helps to drive increases in productivity and profitability on a broad scale.

Community benefits

In addition to the health benefits, active travel serves to reduce traffic congestion, improve air quality, increase community liveability, support environmental sustainability, reduce road transport costs, enhance social cohesion and limit greenhouse gas emissions which contribute to climate change⁽⁶⁾.

WHY THE WORKPLACE?

The workplace is the ideal setting to support and promote active travel and physical activity as it offers a broad reach of large and diverse segments of the population (males and females, young and old, lean and overweight).

Employers tend to have long-term relationships with their employees and so workplace active travel initiatives can be of sustained benefit to both employers and employees.

Employers influence how employees travel to work through workplace policies, facilities and programs. The long term goal should be to build a workplace culture supportive of active travel.

ENCOURAGING ACTIVE TRAVEL IN THE WORKPLACE

There are many ways to encourage employees to use active travel for trips to and for work.

Build awareness:

Building awareness of the benefits of active travel and opportunities to use active modes of travel is important. In your workplace you could:

- Promote active travel and profile employees using active modes in workplace media, e.g. intranet or newsletter articles
- Provide information on public transport and cycle access to the workplace and facilities such as bicycle parking and pool bicycles, e.g. in staff inductions and on your intranet
- Involve staff in walking and cycling events and challenges, e.g. Ride to Work Day, Walk Over October
- Offer incentives for staff to try and keep using active travel, e.g. an active travel allowance or time reward.



HEART FOUNDATION free lunch time walk for city workers during Sustainable September.

Provide facilities:

Infrastructure which supports active travel is important too. Your workplace could:

- Install or improve bicycle parking
- Provide showers and lockers for staff who walk, run or cycle to work
- Provide pool bicycles to make cycling an option for business trips
- Make Smart Rider cards available for business trips by public transport.



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT staff regularly use their pool bicycles to cycle to meetings off site.

Develop a travel plan:

A workplace travel plan is a good framework for managing travel to a workplace, including support for active travel. Developing a travel plan includes assessing workplace access, surveying employees about how they travel and considering practical actions for increasing active, sustainable travel.

Pair active travel with other workplace programs:

Active travel can be integrated into broader employee health and wellbeing programs. It offers an affordable and inclusive option for engaging the workforce in healthy physical activity.

The Healthier Workplace WA service offers information and advice for employers to promote worker's health and wellbeing across physical activity, nutrition, smoking and alcohol. For information and resources visit www.healthierworkplacewa.com.au.

Resources

WORKPLACE CHECKLIST

Question	Your Notes
Does your organisation have a workforce health and wellbeing policy or plan? Is there a coordinator or committee overseeing this?	
What existing workplace health and well-being initiatives do you implement in your workplace?	
Do you currently provide any information on active travel options or organise any events and activities for staff? Ride to work events, information on intranet about public transport or cycle access?	
Do any existing organisational policies encourage or inhibit active travel such as flexible working hours or active travel incentives?	
Do you have adequate workplace facilities to enable active travel to your organisation? Consider doing a workplace access audit.	

ENDNOTES

(1) Physical Activity, Absenteeism and Productivity: An Evidence Review. *Davis & Jones (2007)*.

(2) The Health of Australia's Workforce. *Medibank Private (2005)*. Available at www.trenchhealth.com.au/articles/MEDI_Workplace_Web_Sp.pdf

(3) Workplace Health Promotion: Policy Recommendations that Encourage Employers to Support Health Improvement Programs for their Workers. *Partnership for Prevention, Emory University, Atlanta (2008)*.

(4) Occupational Health: Workplace Health Promotion. *World Health Organisation (2003)*. Available at www.who.int/occupational_health/topics/workplace/en/index1.html

(5) Australia's Health 2010. *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010)*.

(6) The Co-Benefits for Health of Investing in Active Transportation. *NSW Public Health Bulletin, Vol. 21: 5-6 (pp.122-127). Giles-Corti et al. (2010)*.

(7) Workplace Physical Activity Framework. *Alberta Centre for Active Living (2003)*. Available at www.centre4activeliving.ca

(8) Workplace Health Promotion: Case Studies for Creating a Supportive Environment for Health. *Department of Health, Victoria (2011)*.

(9) Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines for Adults (18-64 years). *Commonwealth Department of Health (2014)*. Available at www.health.gov.au/paguidelines

(10) Active Living for All: A Framework for Physical Activity in Western Australia 2012-2016. *Physical Activity Taskforce (2012)*.

(11) Survey of travel by City of Melville residents for the Department of Transport.

(12) Active Transport: Adults (an overview of recent evidence). *Garrard, J (2006)*. Available at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au

