

Walking While Working Can Benefit Your Body and Mind

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

July 12, 2024

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Sitting for prolonged periods of time can have a profound effect on your health. Research shows that it can increase your risk of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and all-cause mortality
- › Installing a walking pad can be a boon for office workers, as it encourages movement while working
- › If you're considering a walking pad for your desk, pick the right features that you need. Make sure that other items on your desk are adjusted so that the entire setup is ergonomic
- › Take walking to the next level by doing it outside in nature, ideally during solar noon to help you reap the benefits of sunlight

An alarming number of people, especially office workers, are leading sedentary lifestyles. If you work a desk job, chances are most of your day is spent sitting down, which can negatively impact your health.¹ With that in mind, what solutions can you turn to in order to break the habit and still get your work done?

I've written about [the benefits of using standing desks](#) before, as it's one of the simplest ways to break free from your chair. But, as a new health trend has shown, you can take your standing desk routine to the next level by using a walking pad.

Using a Walking Pad Can Help Lower Your Mortality Risk

Sitting has now become the norm for many societies, but our bodies are not designed to remain stationary for prolonged periods. A study² published in *Diabetologia* shows that sitting for prolonged periods is associated with 90% increased risk of cardiovascular mortality, 112% increased risk of diabetes and 49% increased risk of all-cause mortality.

But aside from the increased risk of diseases, sitting for long periods puts pressure on your body and can lead to aches and pains. According to UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) Health:³

“Sitting for prolonged periods of time can be a major cause of back pain, cause increased stress of the back, neck arms and legs and can add a tremendous amount of pressure to the back muscles and spinal discs.

Additionally, sitting in a slouched position can overstretch the spinal ligaments and strain the spinal discs. Besides being uncomfortable, poor sitting posture and workplace ergonomics over time can damage spinal structures and contribute to recurrent episodes of neck or back pain.”

If you're an office worker pressed for time, a relatively new health trend – walking pads – may encourage you to move your body more while working. According to a report⁴ by Time, the COVID-19 pandemic allowed more employees to work from home, but the downside is it led to decreased physical activity. With the introduction of walking pads, also called “treadmill desks,” the negative effects of sitting may be offset.

For computer programmer Kenneth Luczko, the benefits were evident. In the Time article⁵ he narrates that ever since he started using a walking pad, he was able to log anywhere between 15,000 and 25,000 steps throughout his workday. He also credits the walking pad for helping him lose weight, and even inspired him to go to the gym and start walking outside.

While the anecdotal evidence is glowing, what does scientific research say about walking pads? As expected, the findings are similar. In a meta-analysis⁶ published in BMC Public Health, researchers reviewed 13 studies with a total of 351 participants.

They noted that energy expenditure significantly increased among walking pad users compared to those who were just sitting. Overall sitting time was reduced as well.

In another study,⁷ published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, researchers selected 15 obese participants and measured their energy expenditure while working. In just 20 minutes of testing, it increased from 72 kilocalories per hour (kcal/h) sitting down to 191 kcal/h while walking (at a speed of 0.4 mph). The researchers went on to conclude that walking while working two to three hours a day can induce a weight loss of 20 to 30 kilograms within a year.

A Walking Pad May Also Help Boost Productivity

Luczko shares that he performs better at work after installing a walking pad under his desk. “It actually helps put me into an awesome flow state when I’m programming,” he says.⁸ The same sentiments are echoed in a Women’s Health Magazine U.K. article⁹ by Priyanka Joshi. She recounts her experience in using a walking pad for two weeks, noting a boost in her productivity and creativity:

“I usually experience a slump around 3pm – I get fidgety and can struggle to concentrate – but walking while working gave me a much-needed energy boost when I felt myself flagging. My afternoon sugar cravings also subsided, and I was getting through my to-do list at an unusually speedy rate.”

That’s no surprise, as published research confirms the link between exercise and improved cognitive function. According to a study¹⁰ published in Comprehensive Physiology:

“Aerobic fitness spares age-related loss of brain tissue during aging, and enhances functional aspects of higher order regions involved in the control of cognition. More active or higher-fit individuals are capable of allocating greater attentional resources toward the environment and are able to process information more quickly.”

How does exercise boost cognitive function, exactly? A study¹¹ published in *Frontiers in Psychology* attempted to answer this question. They noted that exercise induces positive structural changes in your brain partly through epigenetics, which is the study of how cells control gene activity without changing the DNA sequence.¹² In other words, exercise tells your body what genes to turn on or off that can result in better cognitive health.¹³

In another study,¹⁴ researchers observed that that increased physical activity was related to higher gray matter volume in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus of the brain, which “may be an effective prevention for cognitive impairment and other behavioral problems associated with brain atrophy.”

For those unfamiliar with gray matter, it’s a specific tissue found in your brain and spinal cord, which contains a high concentration of neuronal cell bodies.¹⁵ It controls diverse functions such as your memory, emotions and movement.¹⁶

Factors to Consider Before Buying a Walking Pad

While the benefits of a walking pad are commendable, it must be properly installed for you to maximize its benefits. According to certified professional ergonomist James Rethaber,¹⁷ centering your desk to accommodate the walking pad is important. If you simply place a walking pad underneath your desk without adjusting your monitor, keyboard and mouse, the impractical placement can trigger muscle strain and body pain.

Rethaber says that your keyboard should be high enough that your elbows are flexed at slightly below 90 degrees. Other items on your desk you frequently use, such as your phone, mouse and notebook, must be within reaching distance. Finally, the monitor should be at eye level. But if you’re wearing corrective lenses, the monitor may be lower than eye level to make your body more comfortable.¹⁸

Apart from these factors, the act of walking while working can take some getting used to. Rethaber says that you can start at 1 mph to see how your body reacts. By doing it

slowly at first, you'll be able to gauge which tasks can be done while walking and which one requires you to sit down. He also advises you to just walk for five minutes here and there.¹⁹

Etiquette also comes into play, especially when you're working from home. Rethaber says he doesn't utilize the walking pad much when he's in a video conference since it can make noise and cause motion sickness if colleagues see your head moving up and down on the screen.²⁰

Now that you're familiar with the basics of using a walking pad, what product do you buy? These three factors can help in your decision:²¹

- **Weight capacity and width** – One of the first things to consider when buying a walking pad is its load capacity. Most walking pads can handle 200 pounds, and some can even handle 300 pounds. Moreover, consider the width of the belt, which is the part you walk on. Most walking pads are only 12 to 18 inches wide, while traditional treadmills can be 18 to 22 inches wide.
- **Functionality** – Different walking pads provide different functionalities. For example, some are made for a single purpose only – to be placed under your desk, with a maximum speed of 4 mph. Other walking pads can function as a treadmill, allowing you to jog or sprint when positioned away from your desk. These products can come with attachable handrails and reach speeds of 8 to 10 mph.
- **Other features** – Consider what other features you would like to have on your walking pad. For example, do you need something that counts the total steps and time spent on the pad? According to Time, some walking pads can even sync the steps you've taken to other fitness apps for convenience in tracking your progress.²²

When it comes to fitness trackers, it would be wise to **avoid Fitbit as it has been acquired by Google**, stealing and analyzing your health data to be used for their gain. Instead, I recommend the Oura ring, which I believe is a better product and it doesn't steal your personal data.

Take a Brisk Walk During Solar Noon for Better Benefits

While a walking pad is far better than simply sitting at your desk, it cannot replace the benefits you get from walking and spending time in nature.

I encourage you to walk outdoors during solar noon, not only because it helps optimize your vitamin D levels, (ONLY if you have minimal clothing on) but also because the beneficial near-infrared rays from the sun can increase your cellular energy production and decrease your risk of infections. In fact, Women's Health Magazine U.K.²³ acknowledges this drawback of walking pads:

"For Sam Prynne, co-founder of women's only gym StrongHer, the main concern is not getting out in nature. 'Increasing your movement throughout the day on a treadmill is great, but it's important to take time away from your screen, get some fresh air and prioritize your mental health,' she says."

Indeed, basking in Mother Nature is one of the best ways to stay in shape. In a study²⁴ published in Scientific Reports, researchers noted that participants who spent 120 minutes per week or more outdoors (parks, woods, countryside, lakes and beaches) were 59% more likely to report good health and 23% more likely to report better well-being compared to those who reported spending no time in nature.

While you're outside during solar noon, I recommend walking at a moderate intensity. A study published in Frontiers in Public Health²⁵ noted that brisk walking provides a multitude of health benefits, especially among the elderly – improved cardiorespiratory fitness, muscular strength and body composition.

In [my interview with Dr. James O'Keefe](#), a cardiologist at St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City, he noted that that moderate exercise is about two times better at reducing long-term mortality compared to vigorous exercise. Furthermore, you can't overdo moderate-intensity exercise, and since brisk walking falls under this category,²⁶ there's no reason for you to not do it more often. Aim for around 7,000 to 8,000 steps per day, up to 12,000.

Sources and References

- ¹ BMC Public Health volume 22, Article number: 621 (2022), Abstract
- ² Diabetologia. 55, 2895–2905 (2012), Abstract
- ³ UCLA Health, Back Pain When Sitting
- ^{4, 5, 8, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22} Time, May 29, 2024
- ⁶ BMC Public Health. 2021; 21: 2082, Abstract
- ⁷ Br J Sports Med. 2007;41:558–561, Abstract
- ^{9, 23} Women's Health, March 25, 2024
- ¹⁰ Compr Physiol. 2013 Jan; 3(1): 403–428, Abstract
- ¹¹ Front Psychol. 2018; 9: 509, Conclusion
- ^{12, 13} MedlinePlus, What is epigenetics?
- ¹⁴ Neurobiol Aging. 2014 Sep; 35 Suppl 2: S20–S28
- ¹⁵ StatPearls, Neuroanatomy, Gray Matter
- ¹⁶ Cleveland Clinic, Grey Matter
- ²⁴ Sci Rep. 2019; 9: 7730, Abstract
- ²⁵ Front Public Health. 2021; 9: 829367, Abstract
- ²⁶ Harvard T.H. Chan, Examples of Moderate and Vigorous Physical Activity