

# The Healthier Workplace

**How we work is key to our health**, since most of us spend more of our time working than doing anything else. Thankfully, many companies are adapting to that reality: Gone are the days of suits, ties, and a strict 9 to 5. Meanwhile, baby boomers are downshifting, and Millennials and Gen Z are entering the job market with a new mindset about wellness. This transformation has some experts heralding the following healthy trends in the workplace.

## Flexible Schedules

A majority of larger U.S. companies — by one report, up to 80 percent — now offer flexible work options, including more family-friendly schedules, as part of a better all-around emphasis on work-life balance. This is critical to employee satisfaction, according to the United Nations' *World Happiness Report 2017*, and some business experts say there's a new acceptance of a life outside work.

Flex schedules have, in fact, become a prime recruiting tool, according to a 2017 Gallup poll of 195,600 U.S. employees: "The benefits and perks that employees truly care about are those that offer them greater flexibility, autonomy, and the ability to lead a better life."

## Collaborative Environments

Open offices, once hyped as the great hope for workplace collaboration, proved to be more of a distraction — as well as petri dishes for colds and flu. At the same time, telecommuting and remote working were seen as the ultimate in flexibility but they often diminished team cohesion.

Now some business insiders are reconsidering the value of human interaction and the resulting organic collaboration, and companies are creating new, multifaceted office spaces to better enable productivity — and boost morale. "Companies will continue to promote their workspaces and design them to facilitate [productive interactions] between employees," reports *Forbes*.

## Coworking Spaces

For those who work remotely or participate in the growing gig economy, there are multiple new workplace options. Hybrid live-work spaces are on the rise via WeLive, WeWork, and others. The nascent Life Time Work is designed to promote healthy and flexible office spaces — even including access to Life Time health clubs in the monthly membership fees.

"Life Time Work is a completely new take, intentionally designed to reframe our approach to work," explains president James O'Reilly. "We want to inspire novel thinking and better health, with the goal of seeing positive results professionally and personally."

## Prioritized Wellness

While some visionary companies offer perks such as yoga classes, massages, acupuncture, and chef-prepped meals, a 2017 *Harvard Business Review* survey found that most employees simply prefer better health insurance. As unemployment rates drop and competition for quality employees increases, *Forbes* states that employers will strive to prioritize their workers' "financial and mental wellness."

"We spend roughly a third of our adult lives working," O'Reilly notes. "So, beyond the serious physical implications [of sitting a lot], our experience of work has long-term ramifications — not just at work, but also outside work as well."

— MICHAEL DREGNI

## Healthy Heart = Healthy Brain

**Seniors who do** what it takes to keep their hearts functioning at peak efficiency may also be doing their aging brains a favor.

Results of a University of Bordeaux study published in *JAMA* suggest that older adults with the best cardiovascular health are more likely than their less-fit counterparts to avoid cognitive decline. And even small lifestyle changes can make a big difference.

Researchers initially rated the heart health of 6,626 people over age 65 based on seven metrics: nonsmoking, physical activity, diet, cholesterol and glucose levels, body-mass index, and blood pressure. During the eight-year follow-up period, 12.7 percent of those with poor cardiovascular health (optimal levels of two or fewer of the metrics) were diagnosed with dementia, compared with only 7.9 percent of the heart-healthy participants (optimal levels of five to seven metrics).

Overall, the study found that the risk of dementia declined by 10 percent for every additional metric a participant achieved.

"What's important here is that combining optimal cardiovascular metrics can reduce your risk of dementia," lead study author Cécilia Samieri, PhD, told the *New York Times*. "You don't have to be perfect, but each time you add a factor, you reduce your risk."

Samieri, a professor of epidemiology, noted that heart disease and dementia share similar underlying causes, which would explain why caring for your heart may keep you thinking clearly well into your golden years.

— CRAIG COX



## Tennis, Anyone?

**Conventional wisdom** has long touted the benefits of jogging and cycling, but recent research indicates that the key to longevity may involve grabbing a racquet and getting out on the tennis court.

The difference, according to a Danish report, comes down to the social connections.

"Various sports are associated with markedly different improvements in life expectancy," study coauthor Peter Schnohr, MD, DMSc, notes in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*. "Interestingly, the leisure-time sports that inherently involve more social interaction were associated with the best longevity."

Schnohr and his team analyzed exercise patterns and lifespan among nearly 8,600 Danish men and women who participated in the Copenhagen City Heart Study during a 25-year period. Controlling for age, socioeconomic

status, and education, researchers calculated the value of particular activities in terms of extended longevity. They found that, compared with study participants who led sedentary lives, tennis players enjoyed an additional 9.7 years — outdistancing badminton enthusiasts (6.2), soccer players (5), cyclists (3.7), and runners (3.2).

Numerous studies over the years have demonstrated the longevity-enhancing powers of social connections. As far back as 1979, researchers noted that people who led more isolated lives were more than twice as likely to die during a nine-year period than their more sociable peers.

The social aspects of some sports seem to confer similar benefits, but Schnohr and his colleagues caution that their study was observational and does not prove causality.

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## THE RISKS OF SITTING FOR MORE THAN 30 Minutes

A half hour is the maximum amount of time you should sit without getting up and taking a walk, according to a small recent study in the *Journal of Applied Physiology*. Sitting for too long without moving can reduce blood flow to your brain, the study authors found, and past research shows that this can cause temporary cloudy thinking and foggy memory.

A 2017 study in the journal *Circulation* also reported that sitting for hours is harmful to your heart: People who sit for more than nine or 10 hours a day are more prone to type 2 diabetes and heart disease — even if they exercise.

— MD





# Stay Regular Without Laxatives

**Millions of Americans** experience chronic constipation — three or fewer bowel movements a week or straining to pass a hard stool 25 percent of the time. This can cause long-term health problems: The toxins we ingest daily, for instance, are directed quickly to the colon to take the next train out of

the body. If that train is delayed, however, those poisons can get reabsorbed and cause more problems than they might have in the first place.

Despite their popularity, laxatives are not always the best remedy.

These over-the-counter drugs work in one of four ways: 1) by

stimulating the intestinal lining to push stool through the system faster; 2) by drawing water into the colon to soften the stool; 3) by introducing a lubricant, like mineral oil, to ease the stool's passage; or 4) by bulking up the stool with fiber, stimulating the colon to purge it more quickly. But laxative overuse can lead to colon damage, gastrointestinal woes, and vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

To avoid long-term problems, try these at-home strategies for preventing (and relieving) constipation.



**Stay hydrated.** Drink at least half your body weight in fluid ounces of clean, filtered water every day.



**Fill up on fiber-rich whole foods.** To maintain smooth bowel function, eat more whole-food sources of fiber. Eating fiber can also be a key strategy to undo constipation. The natural fiber will help keep you regular, and the accompanying phytonutrients support your overall digestive health. Think legumes, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, peas, artichokes, blackberries, raspberries, and avocados. Ground flaxseed is another great source of fiber; add a tablespoon to smoothies or low-glycemic baked goods.



**Avoid constipating foods.** Dairy is a known trigger for constipation, but it's just one of a handful of foods that can disrupt bowel function. An elimination diet can help identify whether particular foods are causing chronic constipation. "The elimination diet is the gold standard for detecting food sensitivities," says functional-medicine practitioner Thomas Sult, MD. (For details, see [ELmag.com/ifmdetox](http://ELmag.com/ifmdetox).)



**Slow down.** Today's epidemic of digestive distress may be fueled by stress and anxiety. And now, more than ever, we live stressed and isolated lives, Sult says. We're always moving from one task to the next and eating on the run. "Think about sitting down to dinner and having a social meal," he advises. How you eat calms the enteric nervous system — and that can be as instrumental as *what* you eat in keeping you regular.



**Supplement as necessary.** Whole foods are the best way to boost your fiber, but there are situations in which fiber-rich supplements can be beneficial or even necessary: while traveling, when circadian-rhythm disruption can trigger slow transit time; after a major surgery or injury, when a course of painkillers might lead to sluggish bowels; or just after pregnancy, when shifts in the internal geography can slow things down.

— LAINE BERGESON BECCO, FMCHC

# 2,500,000

The number of constipation-related visits to U.S. doctors annually. As many as one in three Americans is estimated to be struggling with bowel movements — but many may be too embarrassed to seek help. As a result, we spend hundreds of millions of dollars every year on over-the-counter laxatives.