



Setting a healthy pace at work

When you consider how much time you spend at work each day, it makes sense to look after your health while you're there.

Pacing yourself is a simple way to do this. By planning your work tasks, taking breaks, eating healthy foods and paying attention to how you feel, you can maximize productivity for both you and your employer.

Setting a healthy work pace can help prevent or reduce

- physical fatigue and strain;
- mental fatigue and stress; and
- workplace injuries, such as those from repetitive strain injuries or overexertion.

Recognizing health risks

Some of the common reasons that people don't work at a healthy pace include

- competing demands, constraints or deadlines;
- getting lost or falling behind in your work by not properly prioritizing;
- just doing the job to get it done without thinking it through and setting a manageable pace;
- employer-driven goals or productivity demands (for example, high-pressure work environments); and
- the perception that co-workers or your employer will think you are working too slowly.

When people don't work at a healthy pace, it can contribute to health problems or concerns.

- People who work desk jobs and in other sedentary work environments often experience fatigue in their back, neck, eyes, arms and shoulders.
- People who perform manual labour that includes lifting, carrying, climbing, operating machinery or working with tools and equipment can easily become fatigued or overworked, heightening the risk of injury.
- Mental fatigue can happen for a variety of reasons including repetitive, boring or mentally demanding tasks. Mental fatigue can lead to decreased mental focus, reduced workplace enjoyment and job satisfaction and—in some cases—injuries or other workplace hazards or incidents.

With planning and a few pacing techniques, you can establish a healthy work pace and reduce the likelihood of the health risks you might otherwise experience.

Pacing techniques

Most pacing techniques can be applied in any workplace regardless of the nature of your work setting. Here are some important techniques you can use to help set a healthy pace for yourself:

- Take regular breaks. By law, employees get to take scheduled work breaks.
- Change tasks often. Avoid repetitive tasks if you can. If you're doing the same task over several hours consecutively, try to take regular breaks, even if the breaks are only a minute or two in length.
- Include active breaks in your day. Be physically active when you take breaks from a work task. Use your breaks to walk, stretch, eat and drink water. Take a few minutes for yourself.
- On your longer active breaks, such as lunch hours, go for a run, a bike ride or a brisk walk outdoors. You'll get a mental and physical break from work—and the fresh air will do you good.
- Try to listen to your body and respond. For example, if your neck or shoulders are getting sore while you work at your computer, get up and move. Do brief exercises to reduce the strain or fatigue you may be feeling.
- Encourage your employer to consider different workstation options, task sequences or work assignments for you and your co-workers.

It also helps to avoid working in awkward positions. For example, kneeling, bending, sitting or crouching for long periods can lead to muscle and joint strain. As often as you can, change positions, switch tasks, alternate tasks with a co-worker and take breaks. These strategies can help maintain both your productivity and health.

For new and returning employees

Pace of work is also critical for new employees and those returning to work after an absence. For employees just returning to work, their body may not be used to performing the physical tasks required by the job or they may not yet have developed the necessary strength.

Employers can work with these employees to develop a plan that allows them to gradually adjust to the pace and physical demands of the job. This is especially true for employees returning to work after an injury or illness.

In some cases, a temporary, modified work position may be helpful. For example, some employees may still be experiencing pain from a past injury. Until they've fully recovered from the injury, the modified work can help ease them back into the workforce. Pacing techniques can also be helpful in this scenario and can help employees avoid new injuries and the risk of aggravating prior injuries.

Tips for employers

Many employers are focused on workplace health, safety and wellness. As part of this approach, employers can play a key role in helping employees set a healthy pace. The benefits can include higher productivity and reduced risk of injury.

If you're an employer, and are looking to help, here are a few ways you can:

- Educate yourself and your employees about the muscle groups most likely to be injured with particular tasks.
- Provide job diversity and cross-training; this helps prevent muscle fatigue and strain. Variety can also be a highly effective tool for improving employee morale.

Through cross-training, employees learn new skills, while employers gain more flexibility when assigning tasks.

- Review your office ergonomics policy. Office ergonomics, including comfortable workstations that help to reduce fatigue and the risks of injury, is recognized by many employers as essential to the health and productivity of their employees.
- Lead by example—owners, managers and supervisors should all demonstrate healthy pacing and take frequent work breaks themselves and encourage employees to do the same.

Although each individual is different, the benefits of setting a healthy pace at work are many. Any employer can promote the health and well-being of their employees at work; promoting effective pacing is just one of the ways this can be done.

Learn more

[Physical Activity @ Work](#)

The Alberta Centre for Active Living web site, which includes videos to help incorporate activity into your work breaks.

[Workers' Compensation Board of Alberta](#)

A guide to office ergonomics provided by the Workers' Compensation Board of Alberta.

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