

whole health **REPORT**



All in a Day's Work

You don't have to leave your healthy lifestyle at home when you go to the office. Maintain your hardworking reputation and make yourself happy and hardy with a few key 9-to-5 strategies. **BY ALICE OGLETHORPE**

WHERE DOES WELLNESS begin? The kitchen? A running trail? A doctor's visit? Or ... at work? You may have heard that the average desk harbors 400 times more bacteria than a toilet seat or that sitting all day raises your risk of heart disease, but the office can actually become a locus of well-being—which is very good news since many of us spend half our waking hours there during the work week.

Take the case of Jessica Waggoner, an administrator at an accounting firm in Bellingham, Washington. When she noticed that the growing pile on her work plate meant that more takeout appeared on her family's dinner plates, she arranged for a community-supported agriculture (CSA) share to be delivered to her office for anyone who wanted to participate. "A local farm gave a presentation promoting their workplace delivery. I wanted to eat healthier and this seemed like an interesting and easy way to do that," she says. "My coworkers

and I were often too busy to make it to the farmers' market. Now the farmers' market could come to us." The benefits have gone beyond increasing everyone's intake of fruit and vegetables. "It's brought us all closer together," says Jessica. "Once a week, we gather in the conference room to pick up our produce and talk about what we're going to make with it. We even bring in samples to share, like raspberry cobbler. It's inspired us to bring other healthy habits into our work days, like running a relay race as a team."

Of course, even with the friendliest colleagues, work is still work. Despite your best efforts, there are times when you're in stress overdrive, you're stuck next to a loud coworker, or you feel like you can't spare a minute to walk to the copy machine, let alone get to a yoga class at lunch. Take heart, though: Even on the challenging days, there are lots of ways to boost your energy and improve your performance and outlook.

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FLOCK TOGETHER

Get a little more personal with your colleagues and you won't just work in a better environment, you'll also live longer. Researchers at Tel Aviv University found that when people had good relationships with their office mates, they were less likely to die in the following two decades than those who didn't have strong workplace connections. Connect, but resist the urge to complain about your boss or colleagues; it may seem harmless, but it can cause team spirit to falter. According to a study in the journal *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, a lack of unity at work increases your risk of becoming depressed by 60 percent.

TAKE ACTION Spend some time together engaged in nonwork activities. Suggest a CSA like Jessica did, start an after-work softball or volleyball team (find leagues through your town's parks and rec department), rent a community garden plot (see ones near you at communitygarden.org), start a craft or healthy baked-goods swap, or organize a karaoke night or a trip to a comedy club. On outings like these, unlike simply eating lunch together in the break room, you're more likely to talk about something other than the office.



BREATHE EASIER WITH A LITTLE GREEN IN YOUR SIGHTLINE, AND GET MORE DONE.

PLANT ONE ON YOUR DESK

"Potted plants can filter volatile organic compounds (VOCs)—toxins like formaldehyde and benzene that are released from carpet, paint, and the standard-issue pressed wood furniture that is found in many offices—from the air around your work space," says Bill Wolverton, Ph.D., a former NASA scientist and the author of *Plants: Why You Can't Live Without Them*. Not only will you breathe easier with a little green in your sight line, you'll get more done and reduce the number of sick days you take, according to a study from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences and Uppsala University in Sweden. Plants lift your spirits, and reducing VOCs may keep you healthier overall.

TAKE ACTION Look for lady palms, rubber plants, and peace lilies, which are especially easy to care for (because let's face it, you don't need another thing on your to-do list) and effective at purifying the air. If you have room, get two plants at least 10 inches tall (Wolverton says the larger the better) and place one at either end of your desk.

DE-CLUTTER YOUR CUBE

A study from the Princeton Neuroscience Institute found that having a disorganized work space makes it difficult for people to process information efficiently. Objects scattered around compete for your attention, and disturb concentration. Even the smallest effort to straighten up your work space makes a satisfying difference. Simply sorting items by type (paper with paper in a neat pile or pens all together in a cup) means they won't fight for your focus as much. "When your desk is neat, you can find what you're looking for faster, helping boost your productivity," says Angela Kantarellis, the owner of AKorganizing in New York City. "And since you're finishing tasks more quickly, you also feel less stressed."

TAKE ACTION Most people are too busy to tidy up completely every single day, and that's OK, says Kantarellis. "Ten minutes at the end of the day is all it takes to put away any files and office supplies you used," she says. "At the very least, stash your pens, paper clips, and Post-it notes in a designated place and stack files in a neat pile." Be sure, too, to wash out your coffee mug and swipe your desk with an antibacterial wipe; you'll appreciate having taken the time when you walk into a cleaner office the next morning. To keep things from piling up during the day, Kantarellis also recommends setting up an inbox so your coworkers aren't adding to your desk's disarray whenever they drop something off for you.

AIR THINGS OUT

If you have symptoms like fatigue and nausea during the week that clear up over the weekend or when you're on vacation, it's possible that you're not sick of your job, but that your job is making you sick. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, poor indoor air quality in offices is a major cause of headaches, eye, nose, and throat irritation, nausea, and forgetfulness. In fact, the air in your office building can be more polluted than the air outside due to a combination of poor ventilation, chemical-based cleaning products, and the VOCs emitted by paint, carpeting, and office furniture.

TAKE ACTION While it's true that you don't have as much control over what you're breathing at the office as you do at home, there are some things you can do to keep clean air circulating. Check to see that you aren't blocking vents with bookcases or other furniture. If you're lucky enough to be able to open nearby windows, do so as often as possible. You can also talk to your office manager to find out how often the air ducts are cleaned—doing it regularly is crucial for filtering out pollutants as the air is circulated. This should all help, but if you still feel crummy, see your doctor for a checkup.

BRING IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Close your eyes and imagine a beautiful beach, a grove of majestic trees, or a clear, trickling stream. Feel refreshed and restored? In a study from the University of Michigan, researchers found that people who looked at photos of natural scenes immediately improved scores on cognition tests. That mental boost could be especially helpful when you're faced with 30 unanswered e-mails, a ringing phone, and a looming deadline for a presentation to your boss.

TAKE ACTION You don't need a million-dollar view. Pick a scenic calendar, upload personal photos from your vacation onto your desktop, or change your screen saver to one featuring appealing landscapes.

MUTE THE MADNESS

It turns out that constantly listening to the freight elevator doors banging shut with every delivery, the printer that won't stop beeping even though there's no paper jam (you've checked!), and the colleague on the phone with IT explaining her computer issue *again* is more than annoying and distracting. Being exposed to office noise actually makes you less motivated to toil away at a difficult task, according to a study in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

TAKE ACTION Pop in earplugs or, if you *really* want to muffle your surroundings, don a pair of noise-canceling headphones. If you enjoy working while listening to music, opt for instrumentals. Researchers from Wichita State University found that classical music helped people perform better on problem-solving tasks.

PLAY IT STRAIGHT

You might think your 3 p.m. energy dip is the result of your extra-early wake-up time or the oversize sandwich you devoured at your desk between meetings, but it could be due to the way you sit. "Correct posture helps you breathe more fully and improves your appearance, concentration, and confidence," says Mike Siemens, clinical director of exercise physiology at Canyon Ranch in Tucson. It also prevents muscle pain, which can make you feel drained.



TAKE ACTION There's no need to drop \$1,000 on a fancy ergonomic desk chair to perfect your posture. Placing a lumbar cushion (find one at optp.com) or simply a rolled-up blanket behind the small of your back does the trick. This naturally pushes your lower back forward and your shoulders back, maintaining the natural curve in your spine. Also try to stand up, walk around, and stretch at least once every hour (use a smartphone app, like Alarmed, to remind you). Place your hands at the top of your buttocks, gently push hips forward and arch your back; repeat five or six times. When you sit down again, keep your chin level and slide your head forward and back a few times to relieve the kinks in your neck.

STANDING UP OFTEN DURING THE WORKDAY CAN REVIVE YOU AND EVEN SLIM YOUR WAISTLINE.

SLIP OUT

Being inside all day is not good for efficiency or stress levels. A study in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* found that spending as little as 20 minutes outside makes you feel more vital and energetic. Even just standing up often throughout the workday can revive you, and it's linked to smaller waist size, according to recent research in the *European Heart Journal*. "Sitting for 10 hours straight comes with health risks, like weight gain and a higher chance of developing diabetes and heart disease, regardless of how much you


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exercise outside of the office,” says Toni Yancey, M.D., a professor at the UCLA School of Public Health. “Short walks during the day help counteract that while also relieving stress.”

TAKE ACTION Make your next brainstorming session a walk-and-talk meeting. If that’s not a possibility, use 15 minutes of your lunch break to take a stroll. At the very least, climb a few flights of stairs throughout the day, walk over to a colleague’s desk instead of sending an e-mail, or take the long way to the restroom (and do a few extra laps around the office on your way back to your desk). Every step you take is one in the direction of health—for you and your colleagues.

GO TO THE TOP With companies cutting back on everything from 401K contributions to free coffee in the break room, asking for more benefits now may seem like bad timing. But an Australian study showed that it can benefit you and your boss: Researchers found that healthy employees were nearly three times more productive than unhealthy ones. Make an appointment with your supervisor to discuss these three effective extras.

1 A COMPREHENSIVE WELLNESS PROGRAM

Whether it’s providing on-site flu shots or smoking cessation help, wellness programs are a great way to encourage healthier lifestyles. Getting one started or adding extra perks if your company already has one is usually an easy win. For those who don’t work at a huge corporation, visit the footwear company Keen’s website, keenfootwear.com, which has a tool kit for starting your own wellness initiative as well as a calculator for figuring out the return on investment for different workplaces—helpful when pitching the idea to your manager.

2 TELECOMMUTING

You might think convincing your employer to let you work from home one day a week is a long shot, but a study from the United Kingdom found that employees who can set their own schedules are more productive than those who have to follow a strict timetable. “Explain to your boss how much more you can get done without commuting,” says Nicole Williams, a career coach in New York City and author of the book *Girl on Top*. “And say it can be on a trial basis. If she has a chance to see how it goes before committing she’ll be more likely to agree.” Find more advice at workoptions.com.

3 A PRIVATE PLACE TO PUMP

Companies with more than 50 employees legally have to provide new moms with breaks and a comfortable spot to express breast milk until their children are 1 year old. If your company is smaller, talk to your boss and explain that workplaces with a lactation support program are rewarded with lower turnover and absenteeism, according to a report by the United States Breastfeeding Committee.