# Setting the Pace

## with Active Office Design

by Ted Kyle, RPh, MBA, and Gwyn Cready, MBA

Fitting in exercise before or after work can be a hassle. You either set the alarm for an extra early wake-up call or push yourself to hit the gym at the end of a long day, when all you want to do is collapse on a couch and zone out. But it wasn't always like this.

## "Sitting Disease"

Americans used to get in a lot more activity right on the job. We lifted, we carried, we hammered, we nailed. But since a lot of manufacturing jobs disappeared overseas and technological advances made it almost a requirement for people to be sitting at a desk or in front of a computer, getting in an appropriate amount of activity has become more challenging. Between work, driving, and watching TV, nearly half of us sit six or more hours a day. And we're suffering the consequences. Scientists and healthcare professionals are beginning to talk about a condition called "sitting disease," which has been associated with increases in diabetes, blood pressure, cancer, heart attacks, and death.

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Studies show that sitting for an hour or more causes the body to slow the production of enzymes that burn fat by as much as 90 percent. It also slows the metabolism of glucose and lowers the level of good HDL cholesterol. The biggest surprise may be that people who are active outside of work are equally affected by long periods of sitting.

In a recent interview in *USA Today*, James Levine, professor of medicine and endocrinology at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and an expert on inactivity studies, says, "If you've been sitting for an hour, you've been sitting too long. My gut feeling, based on the science, is you should be up for ten minutes of every hour. Most likely if you are working in an American office, you are sitting too much." The World Health Organization identified the workspace as a place of critical priority for health promotion and the creation of preventive measures.

## Active Design

Some companies today have started to take notice of the toll inactivity is taking on their employees and are making changes. They're creating offices and personal workspaces that encourage associates to incorporate movement and activity into every part of their daily routine. This is part of a larger movement called Active Design. Active Design encourages architects and space planners to consider every aspect of an environment and how likely it is to encourage activity. City planners use Active Design to create outdoor space in which the things people need – like post offices, grocery stores, and coffee shops – are close to one another

so that we're encouraged to walk to use them. They create safe, inviting bike paths that connect high density living areas to high density job areas. New York City recently revised its Active Design guidelines for architects, designers, and builders. This is how the guide begins:



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**"In the 19th and early 20th centuries, architects and urban reformers helped to defeat infectious diseases like cholera and tuberculosis by designing better buildings, streets, neighborhoods, clean water systems and parks. In the 21st century, designers can again play a crucial role in combating the most rapidly growing public health epidemics of our time: obesity and its impact on related chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers."**

New York City instituted its first Active Design guidelines six years ago, and now the city serves as a model for other cities turning toward healthier environment planning, such as Nashville, Philadelphia, Tucson and Seattle.

Active Design architects who design offices are doing the same thing as their urban planning brethren, albeit on a more personal scale. Current office design often relies on elevators as the primary mode of moving people from floor to floor. Stairways are tucked out of sight and are considered part of fire exit pathways, not a primary transportation option. Active Design architects flip that. They're placing large and inviting stairways in the middle of offices and tucking elevators out of sight. They're reducing the number of coffee, printer and copier stations so people have to walk to get to one, and when they do, they are more likely to be communing with their co-workers. Active Design planners are also building more green space and walking trails outside buildings to

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Steelcase's offerings are not cheap. Prices start at $1,600 and go as high as $4,000 for the desks that include treadmills. Customers include Chevron, Apple, Intel, Allstate, and Google. Manufacturers with more affordable options, such as Ergo with an easily adjustable standing desk it calls a "Kangaroo" and TrekDesk with a $479 desk you add over your own treadmill, have jumped into the market as well. Other people have created their own desks from available materials and have shared their easy-to-follow designs on the web. As prices drop and the principles of Active Design become more common, the number of people with healthier workstations will grow. Cutting edge geek-istas are already catching on: *Wired Magazine* recently put "Get a standing desk" on a list of "18 Data-Driven Ways to Be Happier, Healthier, and Even a Little Smarter" that also includes "Load your plate for maximum nutrition, not maximum taste," "Conserve your willpower" and "Learn to read a scientific report."

> *"According to a recent article in the New York Times, Steelcase, a leading manufacturer of office furniture, began to offer standing desks in 2004. In the last five years, sales have increased fivefold, to more than $40 million annually."*

## Conclusion

Until your company moves to Active Design, incorporating your own version of Active Design into your work day will benefit you. Levine offers the following suggestions:

> It is critical to develop a degree of consciousness to your sitting habits and develop the resolve to move. The mantra we use is: Tag it, think it, do it. For instance, tag an activity where you want to become active such as a weekly telephone conference. Think about how you will make it chair-free — for instance, get a longer handset-to-phone cord. Then do it. Make that weekly teleconference active — pace about your desk during the call.

And if you manage to get yourself upright for at least a part of your workday, consider yourself in good company. Ernest Hemingway, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, Lewis Carroll, Thomas Wolfe, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson are reported to have been devotees of standing while they worked.

***About the Authors:***
*Ted Kyle, RPh, MBA, is a pharmacist and health marketing expert and is also Chairman of the OAC National Board of Directors.*

*Gwyn Cready, MBA, is a communications consultant with more than 20 years of healthcare policy and brand marketing expertise as well as an award-winning romance novelist. You can visit her at* **www.cready.com.**

encourage walking meetings. And they're not limiting their vision to shared spaces.

## Walking and Working

Perhaps the biggest change Active Design proponents are pushing is a revolution in how we think of individual workspaces. Rather than a sitting desk and chair, Active Design proponents are building individual workspaces that include a standing desk or even a standing treadmill desk, which employees can walk on as they work.

According to Levine, "Currently, the default at work is sitting. We need the default to be standing. If you are standing, you are more likely to move. You cannot walk unless you are standing. Studies suggest that if you can get people standing, they will move more and their health parameters will improve." Since experts don't recommend standing or walking all day (and many of us couldn't do it anyway), the ideal may be something closer to half an hour of standing or slow walking followed by half an hour of sitting.

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# OAC
Obesity Action Coalition

# ABOUT THE **OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)**

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.

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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

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Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs • Community Discussion Forum • Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections **AND MUCH MORE**

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