Promoting Active Living and Active Commuting in Alberta's Workplaces

APCCP
Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention

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Issue:

The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 6% of deaths worldwide are caused by an inactive lifestyle (1). This is concerning as physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour are risk factors for chronic disease and certain cancers. Physical activity refers to any movement with a substantial increase in energy expenditure. Sedentary behaviour, on the other hand, refers to "sitting and lounging activities during waking hours" (2), such as computer work or commuting by car (3). It is important to note that negative outcomes related to sedentary behaviour are different and independent from those associated with being physically inactive (4-6). Therefore, people can meet recommended guidelines for physical activity, but still engage in too much sedentary behaviour (2, 6).

According to the Canadian Health Measures Survey, 85% of all adult Canadians do not meet physical activity recommendations of 150 minutes per week (7). This is significant given that increased physical activity reduces the risk of developing various chronic diseases, cancer, and enhances overall well-being (8-10). Further, a 2011 study found that individuals who were active for just 92 minutes a week (lower than the recommended guidelines) had an increased life expectancy of three years when compared with inactive individuals (11). Not surprisingly, in a survey of more than 2000 people, the most commonly reported barrier to being physically active for employed Albertans was a lack of available time (46%) (12).

In addition to low rates of physical activity, increased sedentary behaviour in the workplace is a growing issue in Alberta. The majority of adults in Alberta spend a large portion of their time at work (13) and workplaces have become increasingly sedentary (14, 15). Moreover, almost a third of Albertans say that the time they would like to spend being physically active, they instead spend commuting (2, 12). In a study of office workers, sedentary time accounted for 82% of work hours, while light activity and moderate/vigorous physical activity accounted for 15% and 3% respectively (16). Further, the 2015 Alberta Physical Activity Survey found that on average, Albertans sit for almost nine hours per day (6). Considering this, the workplace and the time spent travelling to and from the workplace are important opportunities for integrating physical activity and reducing sedentary time in the daily lives of many Albertans (8, 17).

Improving Physical Activity and Reducing Sedentary Behaviour during the Workday

Active living has been defined as "the implementation into daily life of the physical activity needed to optimize health" (18, S7) and includes physical activity during leisure time, transportation, and labour purposes (19). Active commuting to and from work is an important component of active living because it increases the level of physical activity integrated into people's daily routines, thereby helping individuals reach and maintain their physical activity goals (20-22). Active commuting involves the use of any human-powered transportation to get to and from work, including walking, cycling, and the use of bus and light rail transit (20-22).

Integrating daily physical activity into the workday through activities, such as active commuting, is not always the 'easy choice' for Albertans. For example, workplaces with firm employee schedules, lack of storage space for bikes and onsite changing facilities, and strict dress codes can make physical activity difficult for Alberta employees (23-25). Moreover, built environment factors in the wider community (i.e. outdated design standards, urban sprawl) and environmental barriers (i.e. traffic congestion, safety hazards, lack of sidewalks, and inefficient bike paths) create significant deterrents to active commuting (23, 26, 27). Consequently, public policies and administrative procedures can help to reduce these barriers by creating supportive social and physical environments that encourage active living and active commuting (10, 24, 28, 29).

A 2015 systematic review by the Alberta Centre for Active Living (ACAL) identified four general types of workplace interventions to achieve better physical activity outcomes and reduce sedentary behaviours (2). These four types of interventions included challenges and competitions, information and counselling, organizational culture and norms, and access and the physical environment. According to the review, the most effective intervention for improving physical activity in the workplace activity was changing organizational culture and norms. Three examples include: flexible work hours to support physical activity participation (e.g. starting work earlier or later); encouraging periodic workplace physical activities (e.g. walking meetings, active breaks, walking lunch groups, and standing desk stretches); and reinforcing an organizational commitment to supporting a healthy workplace (e.g. safe places to store bikes or appealing staircases (2). The most effective workplace intervention to reduce sedentary behaviour was targeting changes in access and the physical environment (2). Two examples include rearranging the layout of the workplace (e.g. having a central printing station further away from workstations) and modifying workstations themselves (e.g. sit-stand workstations)(2). In addition, the authors of the systemic review recommend that interventions should involve an educational component to support employees in incorporating physical activity throughout their day (6).

Findings from a 2014 survey of Alberta policy-influencers in government, schools, workplaces, and the media indicate there is support for interventions that provide incentives for employers to develop physical activity policies (94%) and to improve access to physical activity facilities for workers (98%) (30). Providing education programs (99%), subsidizing activity costs (93%), and providing monetary incentives (93%) were also supported actions (30). Unfortunately, in 2007 most working Canadians (55%) reported that their employers were not very or not at all supportive of physical activity. However, Alberta employees were the most likely of those not receiving employer support to report that such support would encourage them to be more active (17).

Benefits to Taking Action:

For employees:

- Improved physical and mental health, as well as a better ability to cope and reduce workplace stress (9, 31-33).
- Improved productivity, morale, job satisfaction, and enhanced workplace social interaction (34-37). Other positive impacts include employee life satisfaction, increased positive mood states, presenteeism, and reduced body fat (2).
- Financial savings: A Canadian commuter who drives 25km to and from work each day is estimated to pay about $1700 per year in vehicle operating costs (not including parking fees or car ownership costs such as insurance, licence, registration, etc.) (38), while transit typically costs on average $1000 per year (39) and monthly transit passes qualify for a federal tax credit (40).
- Efficient use of time: Commute time can be used for productive purposes (reading or working while using transit) or physical activity if walking or cycling (20, 22).
- Improved workplace culture: Workplaces that allow flexible work hours and provide access to facilities, such as secure bike racks, may see reductions in sedentary behaviour (2).

For employers:

- Employee recruitment and retention: Supporting active commuting options may improve retention of employees and the recruitment of prospective employees who do not have a driver's licence, cannot afford a car or choose not to own one (41). Canadian employees (45%) indicated that physical activity opportunities (including programs and facilities) moderately or greatly influenced their decision to remain with a company (17).
- Reduced absenteeism: Physically active employees take 27% fewer days of sick leave (42).
- Productivity: By being physically active during the commute to work, employees will be more productive and focused during the work day (37).
- Reduced workplace injuries and worker's compensation costs: Per capita worker compensation costs can be reduced by 45 per cent if employees are regularly active (42).

For communities:

- Sustainable transportation: Reduced congestion of roads, increased air quality, decreased carbon emissions, and increased energy conservation (10, 43). A recent cost-benefit analysis in Copenhagen found that the cost to society of travelling by car (related to accidents, climate change, health, and travel time) is more than six times higher compared to cycling (44).
- An increased investment in active transportation will create more equitable mobility options for community members (10, 43, 45).
- Stimulate local economy: Enhancing environments for walking, cycling, and public transportation increases local economic activity as pedestrians and cyclists frequent local businesses more often (46, 47).

Considerations:

Albertans work in many different types of workplaces: small and large companies, rural and urban businesses, private and public operations, large institutions (e.g. education, health), and various levels of government. Some workplaces have stable workforces and some have workforces with regular employee turnover, resulting in clear differences between the health and work conditions of employees (48). Therefore, physical activity initiatives, programs, and policies should be suited to the particular type of workplace (17, 23, 49).

It is not always easy to be physically active at work. Employers and employees alike experience barriers to supporting and engaging in active living within the workplace. Lack of time at work is an important barrier to physical activity for employees (12, 17, 50). In addition, the time pressures and business demands faced by employers can act as a barrier to developing and implementing workplace initiatives. Furthermore, a lack of pleasant spaces near workplaces in which to walk, bicycle, or be active is cited by one in four working Canadians as a barrier to engaging in physical activity during work hours (17). The perceived safety of areas surrounding workplaces is also important as people are less likely to engage in physical activity if they perceive it to be unsafe, even if the actual risk is low (8, 51, 52). Likewise, the absence of on-site facilities (e.g. change rooms, showers, bike racks, equipment storage) and appropriate space (29, 50, 53, 54) create challenges for employees to engage in physical activity and active commuting during work hours.

A lack of employer awareness of the benefits of a healthy work environment can also be a barrier to supporting active living in the workplace. According to a policy statement released by the Alberta Chambers of Commerce in 2008, the findings of a survey conducted in Calgary, Alberta showed that most businesses are not convinced or aware of the benefits of healthy work environments (55). Further, many employers are not aware of the commuting characteristics of their employees or the levels of services available for active commuting (e.g. transit stops, bike paths, etc.) at or near their worksite (56). Workplaces would be best served if employers were to audit their environment and survey their employees to determine what barriers to active living and active commuting exist (57, 58). These audits could inform the planning, constraints, and scale of physical activity initiatives most appropriate for the specific workplace (2). Such barriers may include distance, traffic and neighbourhood safety, climate and weather conditions, and inadequate support facilities (showers and/or lockers) (20, 29, 51). In addition, the provision of financial incentives (e.g. subsidies for footwear, biking equipment, etc.) to encourage active commuting could produce both health and environmental benefits (29, 59-63).

APCCP Priorities for Action:

- Advocate for policies promoting active commuting and active living environments in all government, public, and private sector workplaces in Alberta.

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