

Supporting the physical wellbeing of your people



On average, a working adult will spend around 90,000 hours at work over their lifetime. That's a significant portion of life, which is why creating a healthy working environment and encouraging healthy habits outside of work really matters.

NHS guidelines recommend that adults aim to be active daily, with at least 150 minutes of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity each week, alongside strength-based exercise on two days. Physical wellbeing doesn't just improve physical health, it also plays a vital role in supporting mental wellbeing, helping people manage stress and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

As the CIPD highlights, "good health and wellbeing can be a core enabler of employee engagement and organisational performance."

From a business perspective, the case is clear. According to the Health and Safety Executive, stress, depression or anxiety, and musculoskeletal disorders accounted for the majority of work-related ill health in 2024/25 leading to 22.1 million and 7.1 million days lost respectively.

Supporting physical wellbeing at work isn't just the right thing to do – it's a smart investment in both your people and your organisation.

Why it matters for organisations

Putting wellbeing at the heart of your organisation can help to:

- Improve concentration, productivity and performance
- Reduce health risks linked to sedentary lifestyles
- Enable timely access to support and early intervention
- Take a more preventative approach through services like health surveillance
- Reduce absence, presenteeism and associated costs
- Boost morale, job satisfaction and staff retention

- Support an ageing workforce through faster access to services such as physiotherapy
- Help employees navigate external pressures, such as the cost-of-living crisis

Creating the right foundations

1. Support a healthy work-life balance

Encouraging employees to switch off and recharge is one of the simplest ways to support wellbeing. Rest and recovery are essential for maintaining energy levels, supporting good sleep habits and preventing burnout.

This could be as simple as:

- Taking lunch breaks
- Using annual leave
- Finishing on time where possible
- Limiting non-essential contact outside working hours

Flexible working arrangements can also make a real difference, helping employees balance work alongside caring responsibilities, family commitments and personal wellbeing.

2. Encourage movement and regular breaks

For many roles, especially desk-based ones, long periods of sitting are unavoidable. However, small changes throughout the day can make a significant difference.

Consider encouraging employees to:

- Step away from their desk regularly, even if only to make a drink or briefly rest their eyes from screens
- Stretch between tasks
- Take walking breaks during lunch
- Use stairs if/where possible

Leaders and managers should also model these behaviours. When employees see others taking breaks and prioritising movement, they're more likely to feel comfortable doing the same.

Even a few minutes of movement throughout the day can help improve energy, focus, posture and musculoskeletal health.

3. Review work demands and job design

Workload, job design and autonomy all play an important role in wellbeing.

Where possible:

- Ensure workloads are manageable
- Use staff surveys or wellbeing conversations to identify concerns early
- Give employees an appropriate level of control over how they approach tasks
- Consider how technology can streamline repetitive processes

Research consistently shows that employees who have greater autonomy and influence over their work tend to experience higher levels of wellbeing, motivation and engagement.

4. Optimise the working environment

The physical environment has a direct impact on how people feel and perform.

Consider:

- Providing appropriate training and risk assessments for equipment or machinery
- Reviewing air quality, lighting and temperature
- Ensuring ergonomic workstations for desk-based staff
- Supporting the needs of hybrid and home workers

Small adjustments can prevent problems from developing over time, particularly musculoskeletal issues that can lead to discomfort, reduced productivity and absence.

Taking a proactive approach

5. Invest in early intervention and support

Supporting employees at the earliest opportunity can often lead to better outcomes for both the individual and the organisation.

Occupational health services can support organisations by:

- Providing onsite health checks
- Offering access to physiotherapy
- Supporting health surveillance programmes

- Advising on workplace adjustments and fitness for work

An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) can also be a valuable resource, providing employees with confidential, 24/7 access to professional support for a range of personal and work-related challenges.

Early intervention can often prevent relatively minor concerns from developing into longer-term health issues.

6. Build a positive work culture

Physical wellbeing doesn't exist in isolation – it thrives in the right culture.

Employees are far more likely to take breaks, use annual leave and seek support when they feel supported by their managers and colleagues. Creating a culture where wellbeing is genuinely encouraged, rather than simply talked about, can have a significant impact.

Fostering respect, kindness and compassion helps create an environment where employees feel comfortable prioritising their health without fear of judgement.

Encouraging healthy habits

7. Incentivise activity and engagement

Sometimes, a little encouragement goes a long way.

Consider:

- Step or fitness challenges
- Charity-based activity events
- Healthy food initiatives or shared healthy lunches
- Cycle to Work schemes

These initiatives not only promote physical activity but can also strengthen team connections and create a sense of shared purpose.

8. Promote health and wellbeing resources

Keep wellbeing visible and accessible.

- Share guidance on nutrition, sleep, hydration and physical activity
- Offer support for quitting smoking
- Highlight mental wellbeing resources regularly
- Align communications with national awareness campaigns such as Mental Health Awareness Week or National Fitness Day

Many employees are unaware of the full range of support available to them. Regular communication helps keep wellbeing front of mind and ensures

people know where to turn if they need help.

9. Make healthy choices easier

Sometimes, supporting wellbeing is simply about removing barriers.

You might:

- Provide healthy snacks in shared spaces
- Ensure easy access to drinking water
- Encourage a culture where hydration and balanced nutrition are normal parts of the working day

Small, practical changes can have a surprisingly positive influence on everyday habits.

Final thought

Supporting physical wellbeing doesn't require a complete overhaul. In many cases, it's the small, consistent actions – combined with the right support systems and workplace culture – that make the greatest difference.

By taking a proactive and compassionate approach, organisations can create healthier workplaces where people feel supported, valued and able to perform at their best. The most successful wellbeing strategies aren't necessarily the most complex; they're the ones that become part of everyday working life.

Further support

Health & Safety Executive - Information about health and safety at work.

Sport England - Employee toolkit.

Acas - Wellbeing at work.

Gov.UK - Increasing wellbeing at work.

British Nutrition Foundation - Information about different types of foods, and their impact.

Sources:

- <https://recruiters.theguardian.com/advice/physical-wellbeing-at-work>
- <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/factsheets/well-being-factsheet>