- Walking

Why five-minute walks have been branded the ultimate ‘energy snack’

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WALKING for five minutes every hour is enough to offset the harms to health from sitting down, researchers have said.



A large study found a five-minute exercise break – sometimes called an “exercise snack” – boosted people’s mood, lessened fatigue and did not affect their performance at work.

Studies have already suggested that brief movement breaks can improve health, but this is the first to test different time slots for five-minute walking breaks and how people feel about them.

“Excessive sedentariness has emerged as a significant public health concern that incurs increased risk of many chronic conditions, poorer mental health and mortality and poses a substantive economic burden to healthcare systems,” experts from the US wrote in the British Journal of Sports Medicine.

“Adults in high-income countries now spend 11–12 hours/day sedentary, corresponding to over three-quarters of the waking day.”

Too much sitting down is in part thought to worsen health owing to reduced activity in skeletal muscle and arteries serving the lower limbs.

Regular movement may offset this by improving blood flow and reactivating metabolic processes linked to how the body deals with fats and glucose, the team said.

They said: “Experimental evidence suggests that brief, regular movement breaks (ie, interruptions to prolonged sitting achieved by walking, such as a five-minute walk every half-hour) can counteract the harmful cardiometabolic effects of prolonged sedentary behaviour and improve psychosocial well-being.”

To test the theory, researchers examined data from 11,484 people taking part in a US nationwide challenge aimed at moving more by undertaking little movement breaks.

People followed their usual routine for seven days, then chose five-minute walking breaks either every 30 minutes, every 60 minutes, or every two hours for 14 consecutive days.

Over the 21 days in total, people filled in questionnaires on their fatigue, mood and work performance.

A random sample of 1,200 full-time employees received five text messages every day at 9am, noon, 3pm, 6pm and 9pm to assess the immediate impact of movement breaks.

Analysis of the results suggested that all three break times were seen by people as doable, acceptable and appropriate, although fewer breaks was seen as more obtainable.

People were more likely to report good mood from taking breaks, with every 30-minute break leading to highest gains, while fatigue and low mood scores fell across all break times.

Overall, taking a five-minute break every hour offered the best balance between what people thought was achievable day-to-day and effectiveness for health, researchers said.

Taking short breaks also did not affect work performance, the survey results suggested.

“Concerns that movement breaks might disrupt work productivity have been documented as a perceived barrier to implementation/adoption. However, our findings counter this perception,” the experts, including from Columbia University Medical Centre in New York, said.

They said: “This large-scale study demonstrates that movement breaks are implementable and effective, supporting their potential as a public health strategy.”

Emily McGrath, senior cardiac nurse at the British Heart Foundation, said: “This study looked at how movement breaks affect mood and fatigue, but we also know that sitting for long periods increases the risk of heart and circulatory disease and early death.

“Taking regular ‘energy snacks,’ like a five-minute walk each hour, can boost mood and support heart health.

“While busy schedules can make this challenging, the findings suggest that simple additions of movement can improve overall health.

“However, the study relied on selfreported data and was short-term, so longer research is needed to confirm its impact on heart health.”