

Taking Breaks: When to Start Moving, and When to Stop

Now and then it is good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy.

—Guillaume Apollinaire

Key Points:

- Being inactive is an independent risk factor for vascular disease, just as much as exercise.
- Breaks include short breaks during periods of inactivity, as well as vacations and time you spend just for you.
- Vacations can be helpful, but if you are dreading the workload waiting for you on your return or you return to stressful conditions, the effects are not lasting.

Why Take Breaks? The Hazards of Being Inactive

Clinicians have known for some time that being inactive is unhealthy.¹ It is a risk factor for many negative health outcomes, including metabolic syndrome, impaired fasting glucose and type 2 diabetes, lipid abnormalities, and some cancers.² More surprisingly, perhaps, it is an additional risk factor for heart disease, separate from physical activity. In other words, not exercising *and* being sedentary both contribute separately to the risk of heart disease.³ Fortunately, this risk decreases when people routinely interrupt inactive time with movement breaks.⁴ In addition to lowering overall cardiac risk, frequent movement breaks also decrease waist circumference and lower two-hour plasma glucose. Remember, even if a person has impaired mobility, moving in whatever way they are able to is helpful.

Other benefits of breaks include the following:

- Reducing stress
- Decreasing burnout
- Enhancing productivity
- Improving ability to focus
- Preventing ergonomics-related health problems (“[Improving Work Surroundings through Ergonomics](#)” has additional information.)

Move it or Lose it: Breaks to Make You Less Sedentary

As you explore how to build more breaks into your life and to help others do the same, keep the following suggestions in mind.

1. Be clear about your workplace's policy regarding Breaks

Policies vary greatly from facility to facility. They also depend on your supervisor. It might be helpful for you and your colleagues to discuss this topic together and to come to consensus, with the support of your group's leadership.

2. Consciously build break time into your daily work schedule

To do this, it is important to answer a few questions:

How often should you take breaks?

Every 30 minutes is often suggested, especially for people who spend most of their day sitting or are otherwise inactive for a significant portion of the day. Two larger breaks—one in the middle of the first half of the day, and one in the middle of the second half of the day, are also recommended.

How long should a break be?

3 to 5 minutes is often recommended for shorter breaks. Longer breaks have been found to be helpful if they are at least 10-15 minutes long.⁵

3. Decide how you will spend your break time

A 2014 study recently reviewed the benefit of “Booster Breaks” in the workplace. These breaks, approximately 15-minutes long, were offered during mid-morning and mid-afternoon and were comprised of warm-up time, some combination of aerobic exercise/strengthening/stretching, a cool-down period, and a “relaxation visualization.”⁵ Workers met in groups to participate, and the activities were led by a fellow co-worker who had received special training. Investigators found the breaks were well-received, with employees reporting increased positive feelings, improved overall health, and a sense of camaraderie with fellow “Booster Break” team members.

Consider other options in addition to the “Booster Break.” Variety is good. It is best to do something other than what you do while working; for example, do not take a break from working on a computer by continuing to stare at a screen to surf the Internet or to answer text messages. Being active, as opposed to passive, is probably best to improve cardiac risk, *unless* you are taking a break from highly physical work. Exercise stations may be one way to be active at work, but be sure that they are not a distraction (multitasking is not perhaps as useful as many people assume).⁶

Other options for taking a break include the following:

- Simply do nothing. Play is often said to be the opposite of work, but the opposite of “to work” can also simply be “to pause.” What is the longest period of time you have ever spent doing absolutely nothing? For many people, it is not very long.
- Stretch. Mayo Clinic has a number of “fitness breaks” a person can do while seated in a place like an office. See [Desk Stretches: Video Collection](#) for more information. You can also do a web search for “Office Yoga” and find a number of stretch suggestions.
- Refocus your mind on a word game or other puzzle.

- Eat a healthy snack or drink a healthy beverage. Give your eating or drinking your full attention while you are doing it.
- Take a moment for mindful awareness. For ideas on what you can do, go to “[Mindful Awareness](#)” and “[Mind and Emotions](#)” and their related Integrative Health tools.
- Consider a power nap (20 minutes or less). Be careful not to get into trouble for “sleeping on the job.” Power naps can provide a great energy boost for many people.
- Listen to music. Most songs are 3-5 minutes long.

4. Change locations when you take a break

Go outdoors, or walk to a break room. Leave your desk for a change in scenery. Make a “clean break” from work, even if just for a few minutes. And please, do not take work with you or otherwise mix it in with your break time. Eating a sandwich while dictating clinic notes is not a break!

5. Use reminders

Set your smartphone timer, set up reminders on your computer, or even set an old-fashioned kitchen timer if needed. At one extreme, there are even computer programs (e.g. Euff PC, Scirocco Take a Break, and similar applications) that can enforce breaks by locking you out of your computer for a preselected period of time. In one study “point-of-choice prompting software,” which reminded participants to stand up every 30 minutes, was superior to education alone for reducing the length of uninterrupted sedentary periods.⁷

6. Use a standing work station

Choose not to be sedentary in the first place. Standing work stations have become popular for many employees, and it seems that sit-stand workstations can substantially decrease workers’ time being sedentary.^{8,9} After 8 weeks of use, they lead to improvements in cholesterol and diastolic blood pressure.¹⁰ You can even buy exercise equipment, such as pedals you can operate while seated at a desk.

What about Longer Breaks? The Benefits of Vacations

A vacation is what you take when you can no longer take what you’ve been taking.

—Earl Wilson

Most people are not surprised to learn that, in general, vacations improve health and well-being.¹¹ However, according to a meta-analysis of 7 reviews, the overall health benefit of taking vacations is relatively small.¹² A vacation seems to be much more effective if it is “passive”—that is, if a person lets go of job demands and truly detaches from the stresses of daily life.¹² Vacations are, as might be expected, most beneficial if they do not involve stressful experiences such as illness, lost passports, losing luggage, etc. They are also more helpful if they allow for more positive interactions than usual with one’s spouse or partner and other loved ones.

Unfortunately, the health benefits of vacation seem to fade out entirely within 3 days after the vacation ends.¹³ Burnout reduction seems to last longer—into the 2-week post-vacation range.¹⁴ Regardless of the somewhat limited duration of benefits, it is clear that taking

vacations regularly has its rewards in the long term. A study of over 12,000 men with heart disease risk found that those who did not take annual vacations had significantly increased risk of morbidity and mortality within a 9-year period.¹⁵

How to Take a Long Break: Vacationing Tips

Many of the same tips offered above for short breaks apply to taking vacations, too. Be intentional about where and when you go, be clear about how long you want to be gone, and of course, be clear about what you want to do. A few other suggestions:

1. Vacations should not just become a new form of stress

Avoid overly ambitious itineraries, and allow time to savor and reflect on your experiences. In other words, vacation with mindful awareness. Interestingly, the activities you do while on vacation—be they sightseeing, shopping, or relaxing on a beach—do not seem to matter in terms of the positive effects of vacationing, as long as you fully engage and detach from work with whatever you choose to do.¹⁶

2. To reiterate, REALLY detach from work

Not surprisingly, people who take work with them on vacation find their vacations are less relaxing and not as beneficial to their overall health and well-being.¹³ You **MUST** make a concerted effort to take a vacation from the world of technology. Leave the cell phones, computers, and conference calls behind. Even spending time thinking negatively about work while being on vacation reduces a vacation's benefits.¹⁴ The pile of work that you expect to encounter on returning to work decreases the benefits of your vacation as well.¹⁴ Get someone to cover for you, if possible, or leave yourself a day at the end of your vacation time to do work catch up, if you absolutely have to do so.

3. Vacation length does not seem to matter

Surprisingly, it would seem that a long weekend and a 9-day escape have the same levels of positive effects.¹³ More research is needed to see if a routine 2-day weekend or even a fun evening can have vacation-like benefits. Perhaps simply taking a few moments for mindful awareness, or escaping with a shower or a nap will prove to have similar merits to mini-vacations of sorts.

Conclusion

Clinicians spend a lot of time focusing on what people can *do* to improve their health. Actively moving during the day is beneficial. However, inaction—rest—has healing benefits too. As with so many things related to Integrative Health, it is about striking the right balance based on your individual needs. Get moving from time to time, *and* take time to relax and just be.

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