



## Movement is Medicine

By Dr. Delia Roberts

It's official! The benefits of regular physical activity for every aspect of health and longevity have now been fully recognized. If you want to live a longer, healthier, more productive life do this one thing: *Reduce the amount of time that you spend each day in sedentary situations where you don't move (as in watching TV, computer work and driving).* Here's the why and how to make it possible, even for those who work in occupations where their days are spent sitting in a machine or behind a desk.

Physical activity has been strongly associated with an overall reduction in the likelihood of dying *for any reason*. The risk of developing cardiovascular disease and hypertension is lower, as are metabolic diseases like obesity and type 2 diabetes. Several types of cancers, osteoporosis and mental health disorders like anxiety, depression and dementia are also all lowered with increased physical activity. Furthermore, if you already have any of these diseases, physical activity can help slow the progression. And it's not just disease prevention or reducing the impact of illness already in process, it's the very quality of the life you live every day that is positively affected. The association between physical activity habits and health is so strong that activity levels are now considered one of the key indicators of health. Physical activity has been added to the 'vital signs' in the same way as blood pressure or sugar levels are used as health markers. And all this attention has brought in new resources, with the exercise professional becoming an important part of the healthcare team. So, while the stresses of life may seem more demanding than ever, there is hope that we can all find a way to use this truly powerful health tool.

One of the most important changes in the new recommendations for physical activity is the way that we define exercise; *movement is the key*, not 'working

out' or going to the gym. Incorporating movement throughout your day might just be more helpful than setting a fixed time to exercise and being sedentary the rest of the day.

In October 2020, the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Queen's University and ParticipACTION released a toolkit designed to help Canadians look at exercise differently than in the past. The title of the new recommendations: *"Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines: An Integration of Physical Activity, Sedentary Behaviour, and Sleep"*, indicates the direction these health experts are taking.

The new prescription is designed to cross age, gender, and cultural and socioeconomic boundaries, and is applicable year-round. For people who are not limited by a condition that may require medical clearance or modification of some activities, the recommendation is to participate in a range of physical activities including weight bearing and \*non-weight bearing movements that engage large muscle groups. (\*Non-weight bearing means activities where body weight is supported such as swimming, rowing/paddling, cycling or seated exercises.) Movement should be incorporated through work and play, including but not limited to, sports, recreational activities, transportation (walking or biking to work or to run errands), household activities and job tasks. The previously recommended guidelines of a weekly minimum of 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity, with two-strengthening sessions, still stands. However, the new recommendations now recognize that light physical activities, including standing, can also help maintain health in place of more vigorous activity when you are in a situation where you can't do more intense exercises.

Instead of looking at exercise as a separately scheduled part of your day, the new model takes a more inclusive approach. It emphasizes that minimizing the amount of time spent sitting or lying down without moving (except when sleeping) is crucial for health. Specifically, screen time should be limited to a maximum of three hours per day and total sedentary time, other than sleep, be capped at eight hours/day. The idea is to break up time periods of non-movement with even brief periods of movement - as often as possible.

The recommendations also place an emphasis on sleep. Yes, the physical activity guidelines now also include practicing good sleep hygiene as a significant contributor to health! This means getting seven to nine hours of good-quality sleep on a regular basis, going to bed and waking-up at similar times each day.

### **But what if your work consists of 12+ hours in a truck or machine, behind a desk or on a radio?**

For health practitioners and scientists, these recommendations provide a great solution to widespread health problems. Unfortunately, there are many jobs in forestry where the whole operation would come to a halt if you took a movement break. And it doesn't get much better before or after work - with family commitments, household chores and the need for a little down time to just chill. The reality is, it's going to take a serious change in perspective to adopt these new guidelines. But, if you want to live a long and fulfilling life, with good physical and mental health, then these conversations need to start. We need to work towards ways of adopting these essential lifestyle habits of movement and sleep quality.

Twenty years ago, no one would have believed that the scale schedule could be changed to allow healthier hours of work, or that physiotherapists would visit planting camps and mills. Today, we recognize that in order to keep people working well, they need to be healthy, and part of that responsibility lies with the

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employer and the constraints of the job. It will cost in terms of operational efficiency, site layout and profits to allow people in jobs like equipment operators and haulers to safely take regular 5-10 minute movement breaks, but there are ways to make this happen. And the rewards are far greater than the costs.

## How to Begin

1. As long as it is safe to do so, look for opportunities to get out of your truck whenever it's parked. Likewise, anytime there is a lull in the operation, get out of your machine, or away from your desk. You can talk on your phone while moving and work on your computer while standing.
2. Talk to your employer about creating a safe zone at the landing and scales where you can descend and shake out your legs. Even if you must stay at your machine, climbing in and out, doing a walk around, squatting down and standing up, and bending and reaching are all good ways to get moving. Get into the habit of moving as much as you can, instead of the habit of moving as little as possible.
3. If you can't physically get out of your machine, then shift your body, raise and lower your arms, do shoulder circles and tap your feet. Isometric contractions can also be used, push, pull, squeeze and resist with your legs, arms, torso, feet, hands and head. Rhythmic contraction and relaxation, even in place will get your blood circulating and help muscle strengthen. It's easy to keep a length of elastic banding, a strap or even a couple of small weights in your truck or machine to Activity help with these kinds of movements.
4. Contact your primary health care practitioner and ask for a referral to a kinesiologist. They are trained to prescribe movement and help you find a way to integrate it into your life. They can provide guidance on how to move safely and in ways that you might actually enjoy. There are also new programs available to offer ongoing support. Your primary health care provider can help connect you with the resources you need.



5. Get the Health and Wellness/ Safety Committee involved. Can you negotiate with your employer for activity breaks? Plan your day to give yourself time for movement breaks, knowing that every minute spent moving will lower health care costs and reduce the risk of injury and incident by keeping you more alert, improving balance, agility and strength. Figure out how much one strained knee, shoulder or back costs. Perhaps movement breaks can be accounted for as a budget item as an investment to offset injury costs. After all, moving will help make you strong enough not to strain one of these joints which is a cost benefit in the long run.
  6. Make your meetings active. One-on-one discussions lend themselves well to walking meetings, but even morning tailgate job hazard assessments can incorporate squats and lunges while standing in place. You'll actually listen better while swinging your arms – as long as everyone fully engages. Take judgment out of the picture. If people hesitate due to embarrassment, they may not listen attentively while moving.
  7. Engage your community. Making physical activity a way for your family and friends to spend time together might be quite different from watching your favourite TV show or playing a board or video game. But when you consider the impact on your and your family's health, it's worth the effort. Ping-Pong, shuffleboard, foosball and frisbee are all great games that involve low intensity movement that everyone can play.
- It's going to take time and money to incorporate movement into work and play. We need a cultural shift for the way we view many of the jobs in forestry, and our leisure time. So do a cost benefit analysis and compare a life with a chronic illness, medication and disability (or even premature death) to a healthy engaged lifestyle and it becomes a much simpler decision.
- For more information:**
- [Exercise is Medicine Canada](#)
  - [23 and 1/2 hours: What is the single best thing we can do for our health?](#)
  - [24-hour Movement Guidelines](#) 🏃