WHEN MOST PEOPLE are told they need to exercise they often think of heavy workouts in the gym or marathon runs, but for substantial health benefits, most people need to break up their sedentary-sitting time by simply getting out of their seat and standing or walking more during the day. Sitting is the “anti-exercise” and sitting at a desk all day is increasingly linked to many chronic health problems including obesity and type-2 diabetes. In contrast, standing or walking slowly while working at a desk can double—and even quadruple—calorie expenditure, making it both easier to maintain body weight and likely protecting against chronic diseases associated with a sedentary lifestyle.

The Department of Nutrition and Exercise Physiology is in the process of replacing all the desks of faculty and administrative staff with “active desks.” Active desks get people out of their chairs throughout the day and enable them to stand or slowly walk while working. Department chair Christopher Hardin received the first of these desks. The desk has a treadmill controller and the walking speed can be adjusted from 0.3 to 2.0 miles per hour. The desk is push button height adjustable, so when he needs to sit for meetings or to take a break, one button is pushed, the laptop and monitor swing over to the other half of the desk and work can be done comfortably sitting. Dr. Hardin says it takes some getting used to typing, reading, and meeting with people while slowly walking but after a few days it feels rather natural and comfortable. He averages 5 to 7 miles a day at his “active desk” and also reports feeling more energetic and avoiding the afternoon slump. Although active desks won’t replace the benefits of some moderate to vigorous exercise, they do help people maintain those benefits. During the next year and a half he plans to replace all the old fashioned standard desks for faculty and administrative staff in the Department with active desks and he is seeking funds to cover the cost. Because the University of Missouri is self-insured, undoubtedly the routine use of these desks will decrease health care costs and workplace absenteeism and directly benefit the University. The Department of Nutrition and Exercise Physiology wants to be a model of transforming the workplace into an active, healthier workplace. The hope is other units in the college and across the University and state will eventually follow.