



Take The Stairs

A guide to implementing a workplace based stair use programme



Introduction

This guide details the process involved in the Public Health Agency's staff health and wellbeing initiative to encourage staff to take the stairs instead of the lifts at work. It begins by outlining the problems associated with physical inactivity; summarises the research on the benefits of stair use; and highlights recommendations on how workplaces can promote the use of stairs. It is hoped that your organisation will be able to use this guide alongside other items in the toolkit to implement your own stair use programme.

What's the problem?

Physical inactivity is a public health priority, with sedentary behaviour and lack of physical movement major contributory factors to serious illnesses, including coronary heart disease (CHD), stroke, Type 2 diabetes, and breast and bowel cancers.^{1,2} Inactivity has been described as a "silent killer" and causes more deaths worldwide per year (5.3 million) than smoking (5.1 million).^{1,2} According to the government guidelines, adults should ^{1,3} be active for at least 150 minutes per week, but in 2012/13 41% of men and 51% of women in Northern Ireland did not meet these recommendations and put their health at risk.⁴ The cost of inactivity in the UK is enormous – the health cost is at least £1 billion, but the cost of lost productivity is much greater (£5.5 billion).⁵ The workplace has been recognised as a health promoting setting for some time and employers are increasingly recognising the competitive advantages of a healthy workplace.^{6,7}

Why use the stairs?

- **Easy, cheap, convenient**

Stair use is a simple, easy and effective way for employees to incorporate physical activity into their working day. There is no extra cost, and often no extra time, for employees and minimal cost to employers. Using the stairs is easily integrated into daily activities and associated with various health benefits.⁸⁻¹⁰

All buildings with a lift have staircases – it is a matter of letting everyone know where they are.

- **Benefits employee, employer and planet**

Benefits for employees include improved energy levels and productivity as well as increased fitness levels. Stair use also contributes to better mood, concentration, memory and self-confidence. Risk of injury and absenteeism is reduced and the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers is reduced. From an employer's perspective, promoting physical activity is known to improve business image and reputation, boost staff morale, improve staff attitude towards their employer and can reduce absenteeism.¹¹

Using the stairs reduces electricity use and supports organisational commitments to environmental sustainability.



Does it work? The evidence

- Public Health England report that “there is strong evidence for the effectiveness of interventions to increase stair use”.^{12,13}
- The US Community Preventative Services Task Force “recommends point-of-decision prompts on the basis of strong evidence of effectiveness in increasing the percentage of people choosing to take the stairs rather than an elevator or escalator”.¹⁴
- NICE recommend that employers and their representatives (eg HR directors and senior managers), facilities managers, public health professionals, trade unions, employee representatives and employees “help employees to be physically active during the working day by... putting up signs at strategic points and distributing written information to encourage them to use the stairs rather than lifts”.¹⁵ NICE also recommends that “facility managers ... ensure that staircases are clearly signposted and are attractive to use” and “should be well-lit and well-decorated”.¹⁶
- Recent systematic reviews found that Point of decision (PoD) prompts significantly increased stair climbing rates and when both motivational PoD prompts and directional signs were used, stair use increased even further, with an average increase of 21%.^{17,18} A recent UK study assessing the impact of prompts on stair climbing in three UK offices found significant increases in stair use after prompts were introduced with upward journeys more influenced than downward ones.¹⁹ Those most influenced by the intervention were overweight (BMI >25), infrequent takers of physical activity, women and those aged 25–35 years old. Ninety two percent of new stair climbers reported the habit had become ingrained.

Why don't we use the stairs? Barriers to stair use

Reasons for not using the stairs include the perceived speed and convenience of the lift; having things to carry; habit; being “too lazy”; “just not thinking of the stairs”; and the lift being easier to get to.¹⁹ Peer group factors were also involved, with 6% feeling that taking the lift with other people was “more sociable”. A perception of the staircase as unattractive and/or unsafe is another barrier.

What can we do to get people to take the stairs? Key messages

In deciding which messages to focus on, a previous study found the most influential messages on prompts related to calorie loss (48%) and health (42%), but the simple “take the stairs” message was also very persuasive (43%).¹⁹ But we also wanted to emphasise the benefits of physical activity independent of weight loss, as overweight or obese people gain health benefits from increased physical activity independent of weight change.³ Emphasising that taking the stairs will save time in many workplaces is another key message. Prompts should be placed to disrupt daily routines and “cut-through” to ensure most people notice them.

Having a large number of different motivational prompts which can be changed regularly, footprints or arrows to direct to the stairwell, signs and music in stairwells and recording devices at stairwell entrances/exits (eg blackboards or electronic devices) are all possible means to maintain interest in stair use amongst staff.²⁰ Competition between staff and stair use challenges may help embed and sustain stair use in an organisation in the long term. Smart tracking technology can also be used but these often involve extra costs. The PHA Staff Health and Wellbeing Group decided to focus on PoD prompts at the lifts and stairwells and ‘footprints’ directing people to the stairs.

Step up to health

Employers, planners and local champions all have a role to play to ensure that “physical activity is not just an aspiration for the few, but a reality for all” and meet the goal of “everybody active, every day”.^{3,13} These simple interventions can help get your workers moving. Let’s take some steps to get healthy!

Steps to success

Step 1

Find the key players/contacts/groups – Present your proposals to your local Health and Wellbeing group (if you have one).

Step 2

Get management buy in for the staff time and (small) budget involved, and to give leadership.

Step 3

Get together – a small group is ideal to plan actions needed and drive forward.

Step 4

Plan – the positioning of stairs and stairwells will be different in each workplace, so plan where you will position the prompts and footprints.

Step 5

What do you need? – Assess existing stairwell conditions and identify obvious obstacles to progress. Contact your building manager and/or facilities/maintenance teams to let them know of the plans.

Step 6

Baseline assessment – ideally carry this out before you implement the program, it will help evaluate the success of the programme.

Step 7

Communicate – Finalise plans and let internal communications know.

Step 8

Launch! – Use email, intranet and any other channels available to get the message out about the new programme. A sample launch document is available here.

Step 9

Is it working? Evaluate the program. Use the monitoring form to measure after introduction (ideally measure on the same working day 4–6 weeks after).

Step 10

Keep it up to date – Based on staff feedback and your results, use ongoing communications to encourage awareness of the program. Update your plans based on your findings.

Using the prompts and footprints

Prompts

- Print it. Print in colour at high resolution on good quality paper – for maximum impact.
- Frame it. Simple, inexpensive snap frames make prompts look clean and professional. It’s also less likely to be removed or covered up. They are lightweight and allow the prompts to be changed easily without removing the frame. They stick to the wall with double sided Velcro – so no need for drilling or screws!
- Position it. They need to be close to the lift call button – we positioned 10cm above the call button. Make it straight and symmetrical – use a ruler or measuring tape. Make it look good!
- Own the area! Reduce the number of other signs and posters in the area to the minimal.
- Say thanks! Use ‘thank you’ signs at stairwell exits – this will give people a lift and extra motivation.
- Stay fresh. Rotate prompts on a regular basis (eg 3–4 months) – keep the message fresh and new.
- Keep it clean. Keeping the stairwell clean and tidy will keep people on the stairs.

Footprints

- Consider using footprints to lead people's eyes and thoughts to the stairs – make it fun!
- They are hardwearing but can be replaced or removed.
- Place footprints along the line of an adult stride pattern (approx. 60-70cm from heel to heel) - a simple way is to get a colleague to walk towards the door and use their feet as positioning markers. Follow the natural line of walking towards the staircase.
- Sticking footprints on the stairwell door is eye catching and will draw people to the staircase, especially if the stairwell doors have poor visibility.



Summary

- How and where you use prompts and footprints will depend on your workplace, your building and your workers.
- There is some planning and preparation before - but the job of getting the staircase noticed is not difficult and will not take too long! For example, two colleagues installed framed prompts and footprints on the floors and stairwell doors on six floors of a busy city centre office in only two hours during office hours.
- They can be used in almost any workplace and are quick, simple and easy to use. Get going and get your workplace to step up!

Links:

- Click [here](#) for point of decision prompts – remember to rotate these on a regular basis (eg 3–4 months). Keep a record of which prompts have been used on each floor to keep the message fresh.
- Click [here](#) for a sample launch flyer.
- Click [here](#) to see a promotional video for Take the Stairs. This can be used in your workplace media.
- Click [here](#) for a summary of our evaluation of the Take the Stairs initiative in our building.

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