

# Why You Need To Stop Eating Lunch At Your Desk

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I used to be the anti-role model for lunch. Everyday, I would get my lunch out of the office fridge, bring it to my desk, open up Gmail, and check my emails while eating lunch. Efficiency, right? Wrong. Turns out there are many problems with eating lunch at your desk, and there is such a thing as the perfect lunch break.

I was comforted to discover I was certainly not alone in my lunch eating habits. Research has shown that 62% of Americans eat lunch at their desk. And half of American workers eat lunch alone. In research conducted by the Hartman Group, almost one quarter of those surveyed about their lunch habits agreed with the statement “I eat alone to multitask better.”

Christine Bosch, from the Department of Psychology at the University of Mannheim, found that workers who said they used their lunch break to relax or to spend time with others felt significantly more rejuvenated after their lunch break than those who spent time alone or not engaging in relaxing activities. This is possibly not surprising – of course relaxing during lunch will lead to feeling more re-charged afterwards.

But where things got interesting is the impact this had on work performance. Those who felt recharged after lunch felt more confident in their work performance, such as in their ability to overcome challenges they faced.

There was a negative flow on effect for those who felt less recharged after their lunch break. When surveyed at the end of their workday, they reported feeling more tired at the end of the day, compared to their lunch charged colleagues. Indeed, the less re-charged people had more difficult concentrating on tasks in the afternoon. And for those charged up post-lunch, they also reported feeling more engaged in their work over the course of the afternoon.

One of the most interesting findings to come from this research relates to what academics call “psychological detachment”. This basically means not thinking about work tasks at all. Psychological detachment had no impact on feeling recovered at the end of lunch, suggesting that thinking or talking about work during lunch is fine – and won’t impact on how recovered you feel after your lunch break.

### **To eat together, or not eat together?**

Eating, and even going so far as cooking, with your work mates can be a very effective strategy for organisations to create. While we can’t all have the chef-prepared meals in funky cafeterias of the Googles and Facebooks of the world, even providing a communal eating table can yield great results.

Research conducted at Cornell University by marketing professor Brian Wansink and his team investigated the impact of cooking and eating lunch together at 13 firehouses. Wansink found that eating together and cooking meals together lead to significantly greater work performance. In addition, supervisors reported that communal meals lead to greater cooperation between firefighters. Indeed, those who ate together were more likely to proactively go out of their way to help their co-workers.

### **Should you force people to take a lunch break?**

It’s not just as simple as mandating a lunch break at a set time for you and your team. Giving people a choice plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness of a lunch break.

Research lead by John Trougakos, an associate professor in the management department at the University of Toronto, examined the impact of choice in how their lunch breaks were spent increased or decreased how fatigued employees felt at the end of a workday. The research revealed some interesting findings.

Trougakos and his team found that the impact of socialising or doing work during a lunch break had completely different effects on end of day energy levels. As control over the activities one spent their lunch break doing increased, the impact of lunch break activities switched from increasing end of day fatigue to reducing it.

For example, when employees didn’t have a choice over lunch break activities, socialising during the break lead to higher fatigue at the end of the day. In contrast, when people had a choice over what they did during their lunch break, socialising didn’t have these negative effects.

## **Get some fresh air**

Research published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine examined the impact of just 10 minutes of exercise during a worker's lunch break. Over an eight week period, those who got active over lunch reported feeling more energy and resilience in the afternoon.

And what's particularly exciting about these results is you don't even need to do this every day to reap the benefits. Participants in this study only got moving 3 or 4 times per week.

Other research has supportive the huge benefits of fitting in a bit of exercise over lunch, ranging from feeling more relaxed, more enthusiastic, and less nervous. But it would seem from the aforementioned study that the minimum effective dose is as little as 10 minutes three times per week.

Now if you really want to supercharge the benefits of a light walk over lunch, find your nearest park. Research from the University of Tampere found that people who took a 15 minute walk in a park during lunch experienced greater concentration levels and reported having more energy in the afternoon.

While the habit of eating lunch at your desk can be a hard one to break, set yourself the challenge of trying to avoid desk-eating for one week, and reflect on how this change impacts your afternoon productivity and end of day energy. The change you will probably feel might just be enough to motivate you to kick that desk eating habit forever.