



*Wendy Johnson's workspace
– part office, part gym*

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‘I’m in constant motion!’



FANCY A TREADMILL INSTEAD OF AN OFFICE CHAIR? RHALOU ALLERHAND MEETS ONE WOMAN WHO HAS MADE THE SWAP IN ORDER TO BENEFIT HER HEALTH

Rather than sit slumped at a desk from nine to five like so many of us do, Wendy Johnson, 56, a reader in the department of psychology at Edinburgh University, has a treadmill instead of an office chair and carries out most of her working day in motion.

Originally from Minnesota, in America, Wendy has a sporting background. ‘I was always very active,’ she explains. ‘But growing up in the US, when I was younger there were no teams for girls. There were state swimming championships at my high school, but it was only for boys.’

At this time, women weren’t allowed to enter marathons. ‘I remember the first woman to run the Boston Marathon,’ Wendy recalls. ‘Kathrine Switzer registered using just her initials. The officials gave her a bib, but when they realised she was a woman, they tried to drag her off the course. Her boyfriend beat the guy up so she could continue to run – and she did it! She didn’t collapse like many thought she might. Kathrine Switzer is now on the board of directors for the New York City Marathon and continues to advocate programmes for female sports.’

LEGAL CHANGE

But after the passing of Title IX, a law stating that any publicly financed institution had to spend the same amount of money on female sports as male sports, the face of sport changed dramatically. Largely due to this, women’s running is now very

popular in America. ‘It changed really fast,’ says Wendy. ‘But Title IX also had some unintended repercussions in college sport, where football in the US is just total king. It is extremely popular, especially in the mid-west and a huge amount of money is poured into the programmes. A coach can easily make a million dollars a year. As a result, men’s running and swimming, for example, are often neglected, but are soaring for women, due to the fact the same amount of money has to go into both. A lot of men’s sports don’t get supported now because of the monopoly that football has.’

Wendy narrowly missed the boat, as she graduated in 1973 and Title IX wasn’t implemented until 1974, but she always knew she wanted to run. ‘When I was growing up, we had a race on New Year’s Eve and there was a race organised in a park that had a five-mile drive, which I always did,’ she says. ‘But I didn’t run formally – it wasn’t the norm. My calculus teacher, who was my favourite

teacher, was the head of the cross-country team and I would have given anything to be part of that team.’

ON THE GO

Due in part to changing attitudes, Wendy started to run regularly in college and hasn’t stopped since. ‘In the field that I study, we talk a lot about how people select themselves into environments that suit them best, perhaps for genetic reasons,’ she says. ‘I feel that I always have to be moving. Sometimes I think that someone just wound me up too tight. I like the idea of the changing scenery and when I travel, the best times I’ve had is by taking a run in a new city and just exploring completely by myself. I use maps to figure it all out, but I never know what’s around the next bend because I’ve never been there. Yet when I’m at home, I can still get the same pleasure out of running the same old route I always do.’

With two marathons under her belt, she’s clearly an avid runner, but why the treadmill for a desk chair? ‘At the Mayo Clinic, in Minnesota, where I’m from, they provide comprehensive diagnosis and treatment for virtually all medical and surgical specialities,’ she explains. ‘They focus on health and wellbeing, and they are very proud of what they do. One of the things they recommend is that you should walk half a mile per hour. Experts from the Mayo Clinic say it’s fantastic and that the benefits for the body include improving posture, reducing the risk of back problems, burning calories and keeping you in motion, so you

are more flexible. I decided to give it a go, so I bought a cheap treadmill. It's perfect for this purpose.'

Wendy doesn't actually run on the treadmill while working, but she is in a fairly constant state of motion. 'I walk. The treadmill only moves under my own power – I have to press my arms against the table. So I can't really type – but it does allow me to read and walk! Another reason it appealed is because whenever I was in the UK, no matter if it was summer or winter – if I was on the treadmill, I would never be cold!'

FIT FOR LIFE

Wendy remains active outside work, too. 'At home, I use the elliptical trainer and read at the same time – especially in winter, when it's dark. I do eat my lunch sitting down with something easy to read, and have some peace and quiet. But most of the time I'm on my feet.'

Remaining in almost constant motion has had surprisingly little negative impact on Wendy's physical health. 'I certainly have had problems with my knees and hips over the years, but I exercise to stay flexible and do these religiously to keep myself in top shape. I strongly believe regular high-intensity exercise is really important for general health. It doesn't need to be anything specific, just pick something you like. Do it regularly and have fun with it. Do it with intensity, to maintain a general level of fitness.'

So, does Wendy recommend a treadmill instead of a chair for all? 'It made sense to me to keep moving and not only keeps me warm, but also helps me to stay fit,' she says. 'I've definitely found it is healthier to do things this way. I don't know anyone who has replicated it, but I do think it will become more common in the future. I don't think you have to run specifically, but I do feel that staying active can help keep the body healthy, particularly as you grow older. I'll keep running as long as my legs will do it!'



OUR EXPERT SAYS...

WE ASKED CHIROPRACTOR GERT VAN DER WALT, FROM MORDEN CHIROPRACTIC (WWW.MORDENCHIROPRACTIC.MOONFRUIT.COM), WHY SITTING FOR LONG PERIODS IS BAD FOR YOU

'Scientists tell us there is 300kg of pressure on the lower spinal joints when you are sitting down, when you have no mechanical problems (standing reduces this pressure to 200kg and lying down to 100kg). Added to this, the veins in your legs are stimulated by movement to push blood back up to your heart, so when you're moving, you are taking the strain off your heart.'

'Prolonged sitting tends to draw parts of your body down to your hips, which tend to spread sideways to give you a broader 'foundation'. Also, many people do not have well-designed (ergonomic) workstations and without an adequate posture-supporting chair, they tend to slouch, which strains muscles and joints.'

'Removing your desk chair entirely and replacing it either with a Swiss ball or a treadmill is one option. The Swiss ball will force you to concentrate on your posture and still allows you to type properly. In my opinion, a treadmill might be quite distracting! However, making time to stand up and walk around is crucial. I have a patient who has programmed her computer to alert her every half an hour – she gets up, stretches and moves around for a minute or two, before getting back to work. She reports an increase in concentration, postural stability and has been less prone to colds and flu.'

'You should walk half a mile per hour. The benefits for the body include improving posture, reducing the risk of back problems, burning calories and keeping you in motion, so you are more flexible'



Wendy believes that staying active keeps her body healthy