

How the four-day working week could affect health

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How the four-day working week could impact health

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Evidence suggests that a four-day working week may have positive economic impacts. Now it is time to examine the likely impacts on public health.

There is ongoing discussion about the economic merits and risks of moving from a five- to a four-day (working) week.¹ Proponents argue that employers can maintain or even improve service delivery by changing work processes, workers being more efficient and managing their time better, improving teamwork and workflows, and assisting the adoption of new technologies. When successfully implemented, employees are better off (same salary and more leisure time), with no reduction in employers' output.¹ However, a progressive implementation and constant monitoring are crucial for such success. Additionally, there are risks if such economic benefits are not generalizable to all sectors of the economy.¹

Studies examining evidence from global trials has found positive effects in mental and physical health, as well as sleep and stress.^{2,3,4} However, trials were primarily focused on financial and labour market outcomes, so the evidence for health effects remains limited and based largely on self-reported outcomes. If such a significant shift towards a four-day week is made, what could be the potential impacts on employee health?

Here we propose a series of speculations on potential health impacts and mechanisms. For example, people working fewer days should have more time to invest in other activities. There are thus lessons to be learnt from the literature on recessions and unemployment, that has also identified some positive effects on health such as a possible reduction in cardiovascular disease mortality⁵ – but in this case without the negative effects of income loss. One plausible hypothesis is that more time will allow for an improvement in health behaviours, as workers may follow a healthier diet by cooking more at home or exercising⁶.

It may also allow for more preventive behaviour, for instance to attend any necessary medical check-ups, which might otherwise be neglected due to a busy work schedule.⁶ Another possibility is that this could give families more time together, enhancing bonds that may help wellbeing.

Commuting to work could lead to fewer cars on the road, and therefore fewer related injuries or deaths, as is often observed during recessions.⁷ At the same time, stress-related drinking might decrease.

A four-day working week may also impact sleep. Lack of sleep is an important health risk factor, with serious implications on several diseases.⁸ According to the non-peer reviewed final report of a national trial in Portugal, survey and time-use data of employees who transition to a four-day week showed increased sleep duration, as well as exercising more often and for longer, relative to a control group.⁹ Fewer commutes will also help reduce pollution,¹⁰ another serious health risk factor¹¹ leading to a decrease in pollution-related morbidity and mortality.

The reduction in work duration, and the resulting improvement in the quality of working life, might lead to fewer stress-related illnesses, as well as fewer heart attacks.⁶ Overall, one might expect that a relative reduction in demand for healthcare thanks to the health benefits of a four-day week could help reduce waiting times, in a period where health services are overburdened and there are health worker shortages globally. For a summary of potential mechanisms, please see Figure 1.

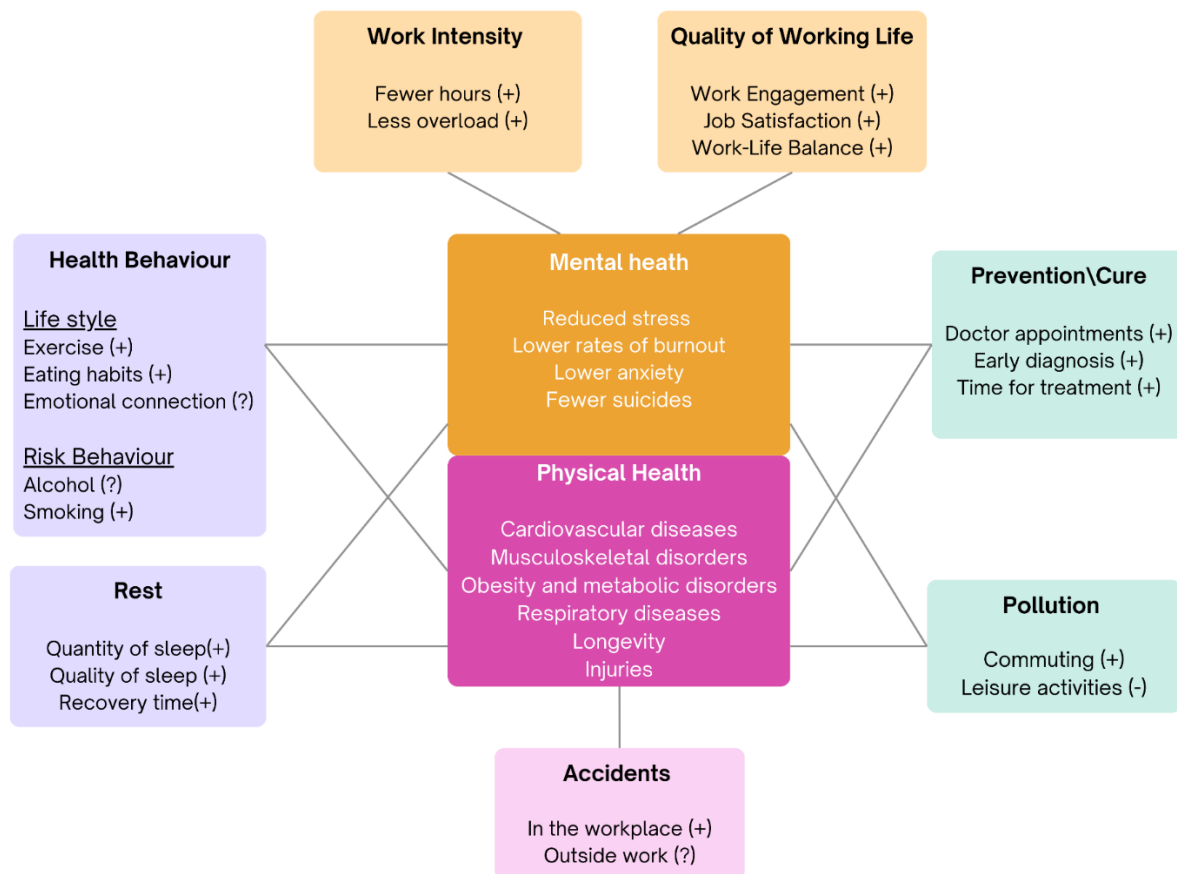
Of course, there are also potential risks to consider. Improved family relationships might come at the expense of weaker social connections at work. With three non-working days a week, people might go out more – increasing binge drinking (as a time-intensive activity that intensifies with fewer hours of work, according to evidence from business cycles)⁷ and drink driving. Some leisure activities might also generate greater pollution. These are all risks that should be considered and measured.

The shift to a four-day week represents more than just a labour market transformation. Lessons from the literature suggest that there could be direct and indirect effects on health, likely positive but not without risks. The health effects may depend on whether its implementation will increase the work intensity on the remaining days, as well as the wider economic consequences. They are also likely to vary depending on the socio-economic status, gender and age.

We call on researchers to quantify the effects of such a shift in health outcomes, moving beyond self-reported data. Forthcoming pilots should be combined with other interventions to understand the factors determining changes towards more healthy or

unhealthy behaviour. Additional evidence will ensure that policymakers and organizations can adopt it to maximize its benefits while minimizing unintended consequences.

Figure 1: Summary of Potential Mechanisms



Note: (+) potential positive effects on health, (-) potential negative effects on health, (?) potential uncertain effects on health.

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