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Review highlights health benefits of flexible working arrangements

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There is evidence to suggest that flexible working might be beneficial for employees' health if they are allowed to have input into their own working patterns, a review by Cochrane Researchers suggests. The study may throw some light on potential health benefits associated with current trends towards more flexible working in the UK and Europe.

In Scandinavian countries, flexible working arrangements for employees with families are commonplace. And last year, the UK government extended an earlier piece of legislation allowing parents of young children to request flexible working, meaning all parents with children under 16 now have the right to request flexible working arrangements. Although it is assumed that such policies are beneficial, it is important to try to understand health impacts in more detail.

The Cochrane Systematic Review included ten studies involving a total of 16,603 people which focused on various different forms of flexible working. Self-scheduling of working hours was found to have positive impacts on a number of health outcomes including blood pressure, sleep and mental health. In one study, for instance, police officers who were able to change their starting times at work showed significant improvements in psychological wellbeing compared to police officers who started work at a fixed hour.

"Flexible working seems to be more beneficial for health and wellbeing where the individuals control their own work patterns, rather than where employers are in control," said the review lead, Clare Bambra of the

Wolfson Research Institute, Durham University in the UK. "Given the limited evidence base, we wouldn't want to make any hard and fast recommendations, but these findings certainly give employers and employees something to think about."

Co-author Kerry Joyce, also based at the Institute, added: "We need to know more about how the health effects of flexible working are experienced by different types of workers, for instance, comparing women to men, old to young and skilled to unskilled. This is important as some forms of flexible working might only be available to employees with higher status occupations and this may serve to increase existing differences in health between social groups."

Provided by Wiley

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