

Reduced sickness absence in regular commuter cyclists can save employers 27 million euros

Employees who cycle regularly to work are less frequently ill, with on average more than one day per year less absenteeism than colleagues who do not cycle to work. If employers in the Netherlands were to encourage employees to cycle to work more, annual savings could reach 27 million euros. These results of the TNO study were presented on 26 January this year by the Dutch Secretary of State for the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, Tineke Huizinga, during the FietsVak 2009 event in the Dutch town of Rosmalen.



Cycling to work is an excellent way of being active. Besides, regular cycling can relatively easily be incorporated in everyday life routines and is feasible for a large group of employees. Being physically active at least 30 minutes a day substantially decreases the risk of death, improves health and physical performance, and can have a positive effect on the prevention of overweight.

The research

Previous TNO studies showed that regular physical activity not only has health benefits, but it can also reduce absenteeism. Since the effect of cycling to work was not known, two Dutch ministries asked TNO to examine the effect of cycling to work on absenteeism. Furthermore, the motives and the current cycling behavior of Dutch

employees was studied, as well as how many Dutch employers encourage cycling to work and their reasons for doing so.

Cycling and absenteeism

The employees of three large Dutch organizations completed a web-based questionnaire on cycling to work in relation to health and work performance. Afterwards the absenteeism data of the year preceding the survey were obtained from the employer. Of the 1236 employees, 64% were regular cyclists and 36% were non-cyclists (see box). Regular cyclists had significantly lower rates of absenteeism (on average 7.4 days per year) than non-cyclists (on average 8.7 days per year). There was

Regular cyclist cycles to work

- A minimum distance of 3 km one way at least 3 times a week
- OR
- A minimum distance of 2 km one way at least 4 times a week

Non-cyclist cycles to work

- less than once a week

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also a relationship between cycling distance and frequency: the more often one cycled and the longer the distance travelled, the lower the rate of absenteeism.

Potential benefits of cycling

The potential benefits of cycling to work are considerable. If the number of employees cycling regularly to work were to increase by one per cent, this would generate an annual cost saving to employers of around 27 million euros. This calculation is based on a working population of about 7.4 million people and an average absenteeism cost of 280 euros per working day.

Employees

To understand the employees' motives of cycling and their cycling behavior, as well as the employers' motives to encourage cycling to work, TNO conducted a survey using an "internet panel" of employers and employees. Of the 799 participating employees, 32% cycle regularly to work (at least 3 times per week). They cited health as the most important reason to cycle regularly to work. Besides living too far away from work to cycle, the most frequently

cited reasons given by the non-cyclists not to cycle to work were the weather and arriving perspiring at work. They claimed that they could be encouraged to cycle to work if they lived closer to their workplace, and if their travel time would be shorter when cycling compared to other transport modes.

Employers

Of the 879 HR managers participating in the research, 48% reported that their organization promotes cycling to work. This is done primarily by providing good and sufficient facilities such as bicycle racks, bathroom facilities and changing facilities. The three most important ways to get employers to encourage cycling to work were:

- Government support, such as increasing the tax allowance for so-called "company bikes"
- Tangible evaluation of the benefits of such investments
- Cooperation with an organization able to professionally promote cycling to work. More than 75% of the responding managers were not aware of existing campaigns or organizations that currently promote cycling to work.

TNO Quality of Life

TNO is a research institute with about 5000 members of staff. It is one of the largest research institutes in Europe. TNO has clustered a variety of disciplines into five core areas, one of which is TNO Quality of Life. Through innovative and applied research, TNO investigates how people function, and how the health of people can be promoted or improved. Together with partners and clients new interventions and solutions are developed, based on insights acquired into the determinants of health and human functioning. TNO Quality of Life distinguishes its activities into the following domains: Work, Chemistry, Innovation Policy, Prevention and Healthcare, Pharmacology and Nutrition.

TNO Quality of Life

Prevention and Healthcare
Wassenaarseweg 56
P.O. Box 2215
2301 CE Leiden
The Netherlands

Ingrid Hendriksen
P +31 71 518 18 85
F +31 71 518 19 03
E ingrid.hendriksen@tno.nl

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Main conclusions

- Employees who cycle regularly to work have less sickness-related absenteeism than non-cyclists.
- The higher the frequency and longer the distance cycled, the lower the rate of absenteeism.
- The potential benefit of cycling to work is considerable. It could mean annual savings of around 27 million euros.

Recommendations

- More government measures to promote cycling and cooperation with organizations that currently promote cycling can help convince employers to begin or increase investments in a cycling policy.
- To develop successful programmes that promote cycling to work, more understanding is needed of what actually convinces employees to use a bicycle in their daily travel to work.

