Could treadmill desks ease New Year's resolutions?

Research says users generally lose weight

Working Smarter column

By Laird Harrison - Tech Page One Dec 24 2013

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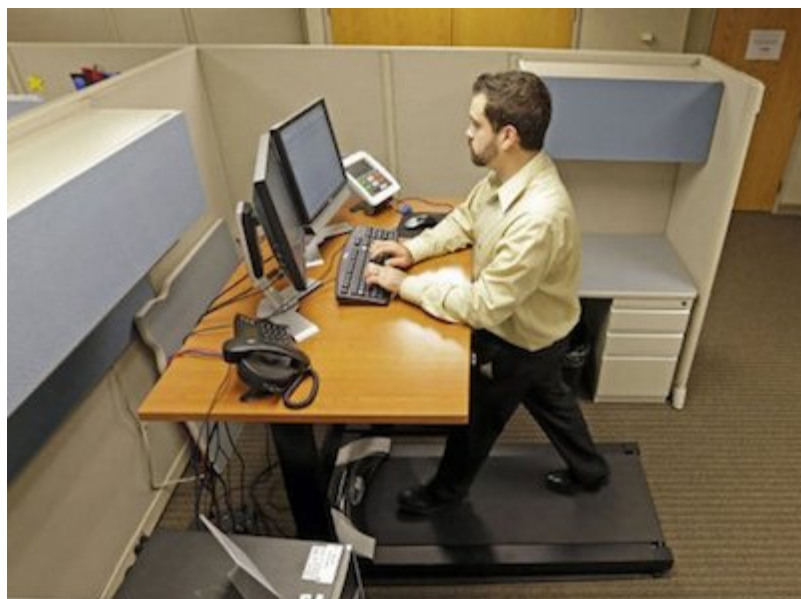
A TreadDesk hard at work. Credit: TreadDesk

When Jerry Carr worked outdoors as a salesman, he was constantly on the move. Switching to a desk job, he felt sluggish and began putting on weight.

He tried setting up a treadmill in his office, but didn't have time to use it. Then it hit him. By removing the console, he could fit part of the treadmill under his desk and walk while he worked. And in that moment, a new company was born.

The year was 2006 and the new company, TreadDesk, of Fishers, Ind., sold 30 specially designed treadmill desks. This year, the company is on track to top 4,000 and looks forward to January, when consumers will seek creative ways to fulfill New Year's resolutions.

Multiple competitors have rolled out similar products since TreadDesk got rolling, each claiming to offer better features than all the others. Costs range widely, too — from a few hundred dollars to more than $5,000, a spread that complicates purchasing decisions.

Risks of sitting

It's not hard to understand the interest. Around the same time that Carr was making his intuitive discovery, researchers were showing the damage that sitting too much can cause. Even if you also exercise regularly, sitting still for the rest of the day can shorten your life.

Standing at a desk offers one solution, but some health problems, such as varicose veins, worsen with standing as well as sitting. It's too early to know whether walking at your desk can reverse the ill effects of sitting, but preliminary research has already shown that people using them generally lose weight.

Prices range widely. More than one desk jockey has followed Carr's initial impulse and assembled a walking workstation. DIY blogs offer advice about putting together pieces of used equipment for as little as $150.

But setting up a walk station isn't quite as simple as buying a used fitness treadmill and stacking a table on top of a desk. Even once you have removed the console and handles, or fit a desk around them, your unit may not serve well for walking, Carr and other professionals argue.

The typical gym treadmill is made to run at high speeds. Runners' feet are in the air much of the time, and runners typically use treadmills for less than an hour at a time. By contrast, working walkers keep their weight on the belt the whole time they use it, and they may use it for the whole workday. This can overheat the motor.

"A traditional treadmill won't stay cool for that long," Carr said. "We had to design it differently."
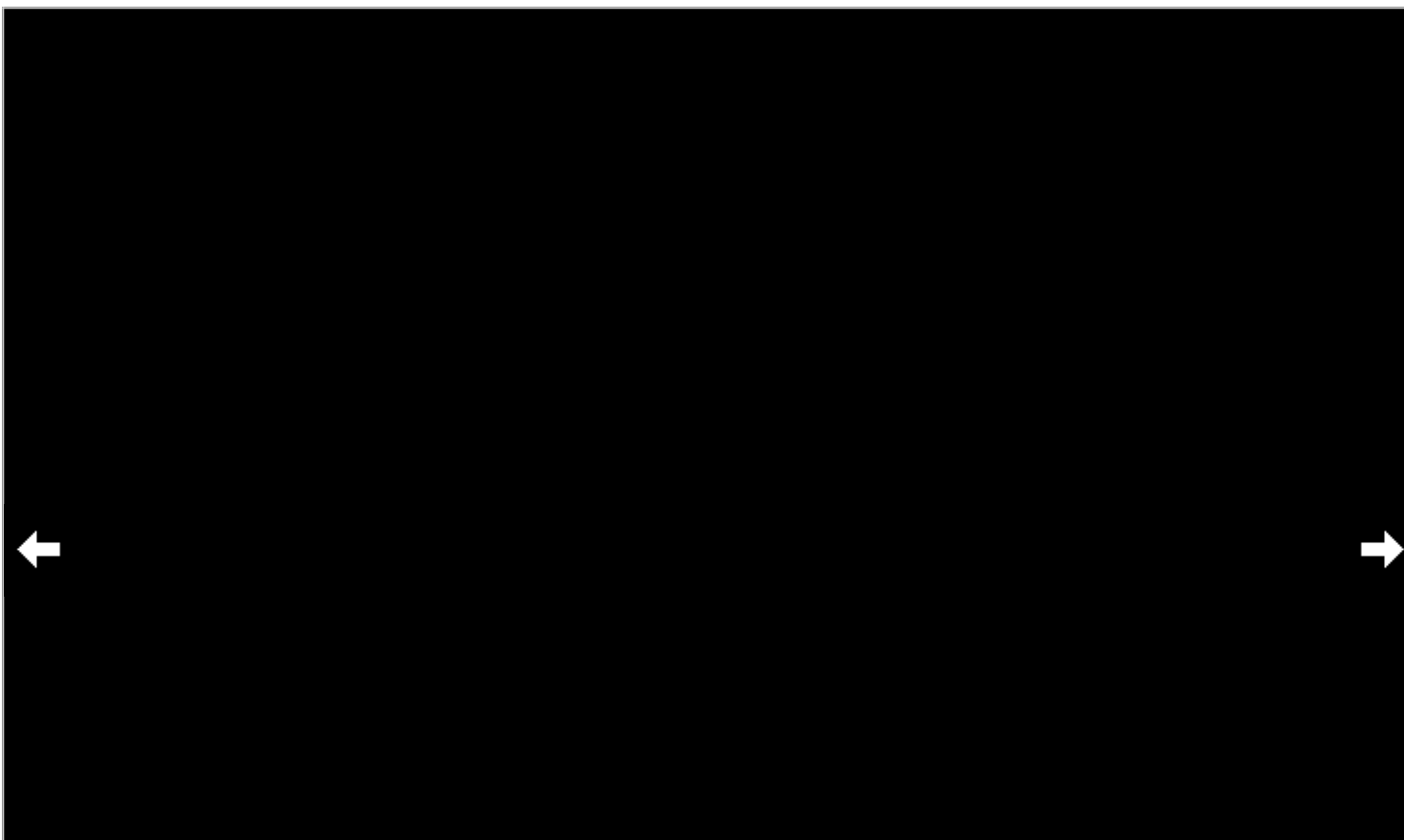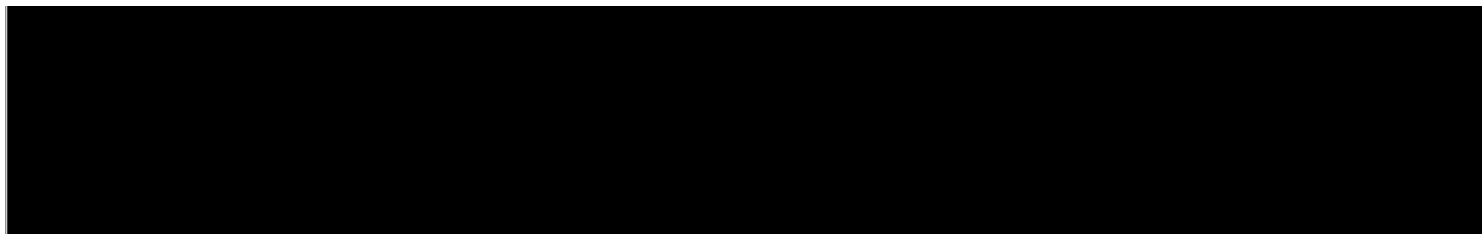
Walk, don't run

TreadDesk mills feature a high-torque 2-horsepower motor and a cooling fan. They don't incline, and for liability reasons, they run only up to 4 miles per hour, a limit imposed by the company's insurer to guard against the risk of someone running into a desk.

"This is not intended as a workout or to take the place of going to the gym," Carr said. "All we're trying to do it get people moving."

So just how important is it to buy a treadmill specifically designed for walking at work? We asked a couple of people who repair them to find out.

Cynthia Elliot of Rough and Ready Repairs in Oakland, Calif., said it should be possible to take a fitness-style treadmill and use it with a desk. But she agreed that not every treadmill can stand up to office use.

"If you use it to walk at work, it's going to have to be pretty heavy duty," she said.

Others who specialize in treadmill repair emphasized the importance of a long warranty and a big motor — at least 2 horsepower. Other advice we heard included the importance of lubrication and giving it a break every 90 minutes or so for a cool down.

What to walk on

What's the best brand? If you're putting together your own combination of a treadmill base and a desk high enough to use it, you can choose from a wide variety of gym-style treadmills, such as those made by True Fitness and Vision Fitness.

If you want to get the treadmill-desk combination, you'll probably find your lowest-cost option at Exerpeutic, which offers a model with a simple non-adjustable desk attached to a 1.5-horsepower treadmill for $689. TreadDesk offers a 2-horsepower treadmill with a variety of electric adjustable desks in packages ranging from $2,100 to $2,245. LifeSpan has clearly made a big investment in this market. It offers three treadmills ranging in power from 2 to 3 horsepower that are sold in combination with simple adjustable desks for $1,300 to $3,000.

"LifeSpan treadmill desk sales tripled last year and show no signs of slowing down," LifeSpan President Peter Schenk said in an email interview. "Our clients aren't just large companies like Google and Nike. They're also Hollywood entertainment agencies, the White House and the small law firm down your street."

Signature has matched the LifeSpan treadmills with more elaborate desks ranging from $2,195 to $3,090. At the top of the price range, Steelcase has a simple adjustable desk over a treadmill (horsepower unavailable) for $4,139, or a more elaborate desk for $4,589.

Is the pricier treadmill worth more money? The treadmill repair experts we interviewed think so, and the investment could pay off in a longer life.

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Laird Harrison has written about technology, business and health for Reuters, Time and WebMD. Living in Oakland, California, Harrison is also a novelist.
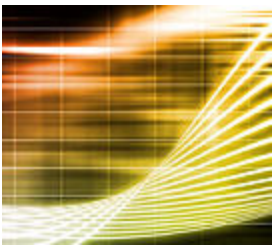
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