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 of lower output if such economic benefits are not generalizable to all sectors of the economy.[1]

Studies examining evidence from global trials have found positive effects on mental and physical health, as well as sleep and stress.[2,3,4] However, they were often 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, which, apart from the negative effects due to financial reasons, has also often identified some positive effects on health, such as a possible reduction in cardiovascular disease mortality [5] – but in this case without the negative effects of income loss. One plausible

hypothesis is that more time will allow for an improvement in time-sensitive health behaviours, as workers may follow a healthier diet by cooking more at home or exercising.[6] 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.

Shortening the working week could reduce accidents on and off work. There is causal evidence that legislative reductions of working hours decrease work accidents and reduce injury rates. [7] Reduced commuting to work could lead to fewer cars on the road, and therefore fewer related injuries or deaths, as is often observed during recessions.[8] Fewer commutes would also help reduce pollution[1] (another serious health risk factor), leading to a decrease in pollution-related morbidity and mortality.[9] 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.[10] A randomised controlled trial in Sweden evaluated a 25% reduction in weekly working hours and found improvements in sleep quality and duration (an average increase of 23 minutes), and significant reductions in sleepiness, perceived stress, and bedtime worries on workdays, relative to a control group.[3]

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 lower cardiovascular mortality.[5] 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.

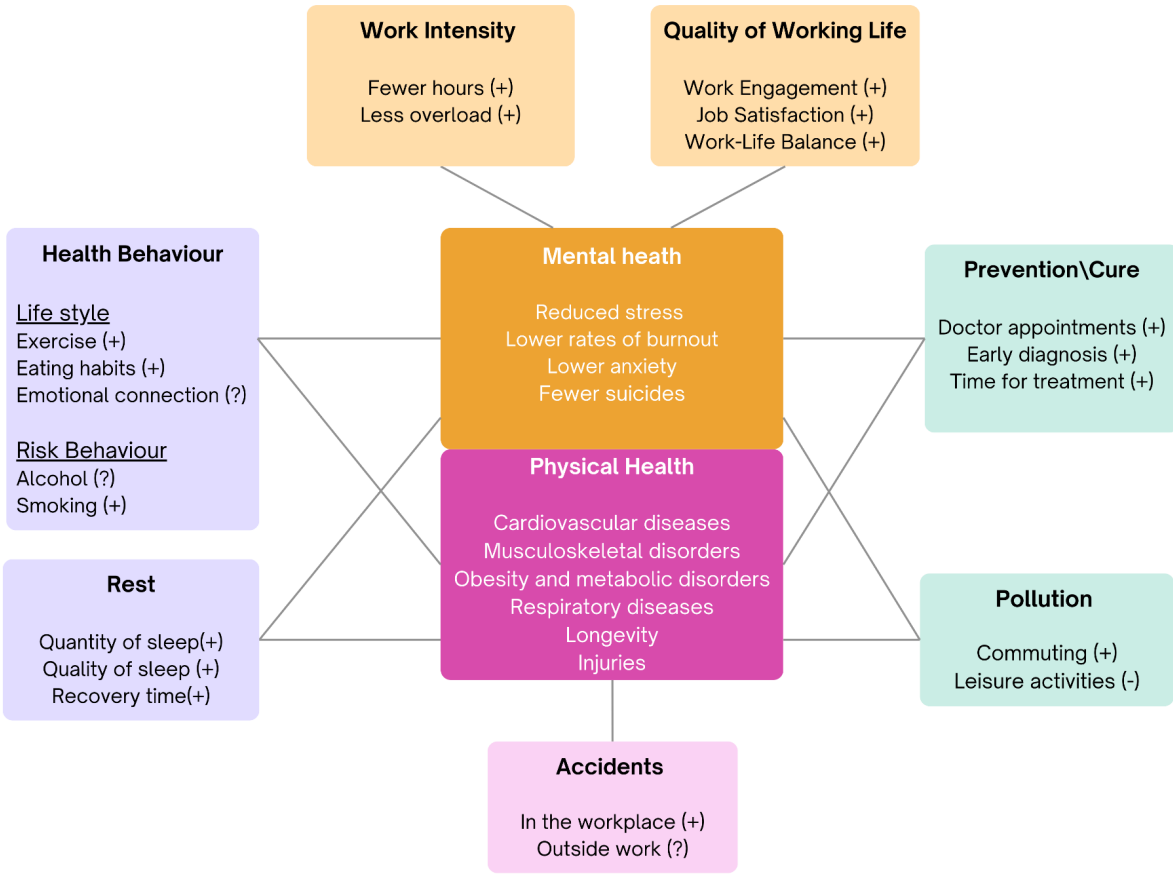
Of course, there are also several potential risks to consider. Improved family relationships might come at the expense of weaker social connections at work. With three non-working days a week, people might go out more – increasing binge drinking (as a time-intensive activity that may intensify with fewer hours of work, according to evidence from business cycles)[6] and drink-driving. A general increase in leisure activities might 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, the choice of

additional activities, 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. These 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 organisations can adopt it to maximise its benefits while minimising 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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