I am writing this while walking on a treadmill. And now you know the biggest problem with working at a treadmill desk: the compulsion to announce constantly that you are working at a treadmill desk. It’s a lot like the early days of cell-phone calls, when the simple fact that you were doing what you were doing seemed so amazing that most conversations consisted largely of exclamations about the amazingness of the call. I got my treadmill desk about three months ago, but I’m still in the announcement phase. I would like to have it be known that I have walked while buying shoes online; while Photoshopping pictures of my cats; while e-mailing my son’s soccer coach; and while paying bills. I had been eagerly awaiting the first time I would have a phone conversation with someone who was also walking at a treadmill desk. That happened not long ago, when I spoke to Dr. James Levine, the leading researcher in the marvellous-sounding field of “inactivity studies,” at the Mayo Clinic’s Scottsdale, Arizona, campus, and the most prominent of walking-desk partisans. I was already on my second mile of the day when I called him. He had just stepped out for coffee and was on his way back to his office, and he managed to open the door, put down his coffee, step onto his treadmill, and start walking without skipping a beat. “You’re going to hear a bit of an odd sound,” Levine said. “That’s my treadmill.”

Despite his warning, I didn’t really hear anything odd in the background except an initial clunk and growl as his treadmill started moving, and anyway, the soft whirring of my own treadmill probably cancelled it out. Levine, who is fifty years old, grew up in England, and was the sort of geeky kid who was happy to stay up all night observing his pet snails to see how far they would move, or to sit in an ice-cold bath for an hour to try to figure out how much body heat he had lost. “Pretty strange for a twelve-year-old,” Levine said. “But this was my calling.” After medical school, at Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, in London, he interned at the Mayo Clinic, in Rochester, Minnesota, and has been with the clinic ever since. We talked for about a mile, and when we were finished I told Levine that I had now achieved one of my treadmill-desk dreams, the two-way walking phone conversation. “See, I love that,” he said. “One of the greatest inventions in the world is telephone calls on treadmills.” He added, “That is my dream for all Americans.”

If you’ve ever read a magazine while running on a treadmill at the gym, you’ve almost worked at a treadmill desk. But people don’t run at treadmill desks. They walk at one or two miles per hour, which is slow enough so that it doesn’t interfere with typing or talking or reading. Essentially, “treadmill desk” or the variant term, “walking workstation,” just refers to a surface that’s high enough to accommodate a worker who is walking on a treadmill rather than sitting on a chair. It doesn’t look much different from the kind of standing desk that Winston Churchill used. Any treadmill can be used to make a treadmill desk, though many manufacturers now provide models that are specific for desk use, without handrails and equipped with motors that are designed to run for long hours at slow speeds. James Levine made his first treadmill desk, in 1999, from one of those tray tables with a telescoping base made to fit over an elevated hospital bed and a secondhand Sears treadmill that he got for three hundred dollars. “Voilà, a treadmill desk!” he said. While Levine had a professional interest in studying the science of calorie burning, his motivation was also personal. He was so chubby as a...
kid that his nickname was Puffer, and the day before he put his desk together his wife had told him that he was getting kind of fat. "I was on my bottom a lot: watching Monday-night football, Tuesday-night basketball, 'Simpsons' every night," Levine said. He now sits so rarely that colleagues have taken pictures of him seated during meals just to prove that he does sometimes make use of a chair.

Levine first began thinking about walking in 1999, after he conducted a study at the Mayo Clinic about why some people seemed prone to gain weight while others seemed immune, even when they ate exactly the same amount. The sixteen study subjects were fed a strictly monitored diet and were observed with what he calls "an atrocious degree of attention to detail" to see what they did differently. The study concluded that the people who stayed thin managed to increase what Levine calls "non-exercise activity thermogenesis"; that is, they moved throughout the day, fidgeting, pacing, standing, bouncing on the balls of their feet, and jiggling their legs. That activity, which had mostly gone unnoticed, ended up accounting for a slow burn of as much as eight hundred extra calories.

Subsequent research, by Levine and others, was even more surprising. Sitting a lot, even if you're in good shape, is bad. If you go to the gym three times a week, you may feel fit, but you won't be metabolically healthy. Sitting puts muscles into a sort of hibernation, cutting off their electrical activity and shutting down the production of lipoprotein lipase, the enzyme that breaks down fat molecules in the blood. Your metabolic rate drops to about one calorie a minute—just slightly higher than if you were dead. Sitting for more than two hours causes the presence of good cholesterol to drop, and, in time, insulin effectiveness plummets. This can lead to cardiovascular problems, certain kinds of cancer, depression, deep-vein thrombosis, and type-2 diabetes. There is even speculation that being moderately active—that is, not sitting—can delay the progression of pre-dementia to dementia.

The worst news is that hard exercise for an hour a day may not cancel out the damage done by sitting for six hours. According to a 2006 study by an epidemiologist at the American Cancer Society, men who sit for six hours or more daily have an over-all death rate twenty per cent higher than men who sit for three hours or less—in other words, there are twenty per cent more likely to die of any cause than men who are active. A University College London review of studies done between 1970 and 2007 of close to half a million people showed that walking reduced the risk of cardiovascular events by thirty-one per cent, and it cut the risk of dying during the period of the studies by thirty-two per cent. For women, sitting is especially unhealthy: women who sit more than six hours a day die at a rate that's forty per cent higher than that for women who move more.

Someone gave me a copy of Levine's book "Move a Little, Lose a Lot" in 2009, when it was published. The book got a lot of attention, especially because Levine argued that small changes could be significant—that to be healthy and lose some weight you didn't need to grind out an hour at the gym but could simply start spending more of your day on your feet. (Levine suggests in his introduction that you read the book either standing up or pacing.) At the time, I was a runner, and Levine's gospel of taking little walks throughout the day didn't appeal to me; like many runners, I thought that walking was boring. Also, it took too much time.

On the other hand, I was always a bit of a seeker when it came to desk chairs. I used one of my first big paychecks to buy the classic Herman Miller Aeron chair. Then I switched it out for a Balans kneeling chair, because I had heard that kneeling at my desk would open my diaphragm and restore my natural spine alignment, which sounded pretty good. But the kneeling chair hurt my knees and made me feel as if I were sitting inside a giant Birkenstock sandal. I went back to my Aeron. I heard of people who used rubber balance balls as desk chairs, but I knew that if the kneeling chair made me feel stupid a big rubber ball would be more than I could handle. Plus, I'd read that people sometimes rolled off them. Also, the balls were known to occasionally and spectacularly deflate—collapsing, as Ergonomics Today put it, "like the Hindenburg."

I was still a devoted runner, but, by this point, I had a young kid, and I was starting to find it harder to fit in my running. Who had time not just to run but also to warm up and then to cool down, and then to shower? Also, the resolve that used to power me up sheer hills and through ugly weather was abandoning me. So I ran a little less. Sometimes I didn't run at all. I wondered if I could get back to it if I ran somewhere flat and temperature-controlled, but I lived out in the country, and the closest gym was a twenty-minute drive away. Then, unexpectedly, I had to have spine surgery, and I was under strict orders not to run—or bungee-jump or skydive—for at least a year. Bicycling was out, too. Suddenly, I was a walker.

Around that time, I got myself a Fitbit, a digital pedometer that counts steps and calories and tracks it all via software. The Fitbit is small and unobtrusive, so it was easy to put on in the morning and wear all day. Rather than just measuring
the epic around-the-block exercise walks I had begun to take, it measured all my walking, including the incidental steps I took while, say, grocery shopping or getting the mail. Furthermore, at the end of the year Fitbit sent out e-mails giving users the geographical equivalent of their step count. (I had travelled the length of the Tigris River.) There was also the brilliant additional attraction of competition. My husband and several of our friends had Fitbits, and we could see another’s step count online. The recommended daily goal was ten thousand steps, but people on the leaderboard were racking up as many as fifteen thousand or more. We became ruthless. Sometimes my husband would pause before he got undressed for bed, discreetly check his step count against mine, and then mention, as if it had just occurred to him, that he thought the dog could use a little more fresh air before going to sleep. I knew exactly what he was up to, so while he walked the dog I paced around the bedroom.

The thing with walking, though, is that it really does take a lot of time. When I ran, I could whip through five miles in forty-five minutes, but walking the same distance would take forever. When I lived in New York City, I walked all the time, just to get errands done, but I had moved to the Hudson Valley, and then to Los Angeles, which meant—well, you know. “Making people less sedentary raises a practical question,” Levine said. “Everybody is busy. How are people going to get those extra hours of movement? You have to convert chair time to walking time.”

Voilà, the treadmill desk. I’m not sure where or how I first heard about the contraption, but I found out that several people I knew had one. In fact, I learned that two of my Fitbit friends whose step counts were astronomical were working at treadmill desks, so suddenly those numbers made sense. Multitasking! Still, I dithered; I had seen so many treadmills at garage sales, barely broken in. Would I be adding another? This seemed different, though. A treadmill at my desk wouldn’t require time set aside to use it, because it would be part of my everyday life.

I ended up buying a LifeSpan treadmill designed specifically to use under a desk, and a computer stand/desk gizmo called a Kangaroo, which is a platform that sits on my existing desk and can be lowered if I decide to sit and work for a change. (I have yet to lower it, because I haven’t had the urge to sit and work.) I was warned that I should ease into the walking work life, to get used to being on my feet for so long and to adjust to the slightly odd sensation of typing while walking, although the first day I walked two miles without really even noticing.

My computer monitor jiggled a bit when I started, but, once I showered that up with an adjustable leg that came with my treadmill desktop, it was a normal workday, just in motion. Unlike after a session at the gym or going out for a run, I wasn’t hot and sweaty. I totally killed on the step count that night, and there was no amount of dog walking my husband could do to catch up.

Working while walking on a treadmill may seem kooky, but Levine is determined to make it mainstream. He tested the desks with a group of more than three hundred volunteers at the Mayo Clinic, all of whom liked them, Levine says, except for one person, but he didn’t like working on a computer anyway. Levine then partnered with Steelcase, the office-furniture company, and in 2007 they introduced the first official treadmill desk—a sleek, adjustable setup that costs more than four thousand dollars. Levine hopes that treadmill workstations will eventually become cheap enough for everyone to use, but he says he wanted the Steelcase imprint right away, in order to “professionalize” the desks and make them seem more than “kitsch.” Corporations, including Aetna and Google, and institutions, like Arizona State University, have begun offering employees treadmill desks, and last month the Oregon House Committee on Health Care approved a pilot program to test the use of treadmill desks by state employees.

A score of treadmill-desk companies have sprung up in the past few years, including TreadDesk, TrekDesk, Exerpeutic, the Human Solution, Ergo Desktop, and Ergotron, and a number of Web sites have instructions on how to make your own by retrofitting an ordinary treadmill and building an elevated work surface using odds and ends—IKEA components, or milk crates and doors, or filing cabinets and old lumber.

Fitbit has a community forum of people who work at treadmill desks, and the Internet group Office Walkers (which has the slogan “Working @ 100 calories per hour”) now has more than a thousand members. The group mostly discusses issues like the challenges of using a mouse while walking, but there are occasional surprises, like the confession some time ago by Luke DeskWalker (not his real name, I’m guessing) about how working on a treadmill has helped him dance. “The thing is I can’t dance. Normally,” DeskWalker posted, saying that he thought being in motion on his treadmill all day had given him a newfound talent for shimmying. “Of course I have to be listening to music,” he added. “Anyone else experience this same effect?”

There are a few things about working on a treadmill that are problematic. Drinking coffee is a known hazard. If you go too fast, phone calls will be punctuated by gasps for air, which can lend the conversation a desperate quality. Anyone who visits your office will forget what he or she came to talk to you about and will spend at least ten minutes asking you all about your treadmill desk. And then there’s that annoying habit of telling everyone that you’re walking while you’re working, although there’s a good chance that, with time, the urge to make that announcement will subside.

Levine thinks that walking could make everything better—not only health but society, and culture, and life. “Chairdom is hugely affecting humans,” he said. “No one has really understood what we have lost by sitting all the time.” He reminisced a bit about his childhood, when he would walk to town with his grandfather to do the shopping, seeing neighbors along the way. I could hear that he had turned off his treadmill, and he told me that he was about to head home. As we were saying goodbye, he mentioned that some people end up walking a half marathon during the workday.

“Wow,” I said.

“Wow is the point!” Levine said.

I did some quick math: if I kept working a few more hours, maybe I could do a 10K. ♦