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Breaking news

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It's the last week of summer, and you may have noticed something missing from your job besides adequate pay, decent hours, supportive management and general job satisfaction: your co-workers.

Chances are they're on vacation, enjoying the beach, marveling at architecture or sampling themselves silly at a winery.

"Good for them," you might respond. "While they're riding Space Mountain, I'm getting things done."

Dial it back, coffee achiever! Vacation-skipppers are legion in our overworked age, with more than a third of American workers failing to use up the paltry time they're given, according to a new survey by Expedia.com. The number of us who take a full week off at a time has declined by a third since 1990, according to the US bureau of labor statistics.

But experts say if you don't follow your co-workers' lead on a regular basis, you increase your chances for life-threatening ailments, psychological afflictions and other manner of misery. And miserable workers do not get things done.

Though the scientific research is still in its infancy, it tends to confirm the intuitive notion that a steady, reasonable diet of vacations makes a worker healthier and happier overall.

"The studies that are out there seem to point to a correlation between vacation and long-term physiological and psychological problems," says John de Graff, the national coordinator of Take Back Your Time, a vacation and paid-leave advocacy group.

Here's a slice of what's out there:

n Men who skipped annual vacations were about 20 percent more likely to die over a nine-year period than men who consistently took a breather, according to a study by Brooks Gump, a health psychologist at SUNY Oswego, and Karen Matthews, a professor of epidemiology and psychology at the University of Pittsburgh.

n Women who took vacations only once in two years were more likely to experience depression, tension, fatigue and marital dissatisfaction than women who took time off at least twice a year, according to a five-year study of 1,500 women by Cathy McCarty of the Marshfield Clinic.

n Women are twice as likely to have a heart attack -- while men are a third more likely -- if they don't take regular vacations, according to research by Elaine Eaker of the Framington Heart Study project.

What regular vacationers are experiencing is a break from job-related stress, which helps create the ailments that were under the microscope, according to the studies.

To understand how stress messes with the body, experts say it helps to go back in time.

"Rewind back about 10,000 years, and you're walking down a trail and a saber-toothed tiger jumps out from behind a rock," says Donald Darst, an internal medicine specialist with the Nebraska Medical Center who's repeatedly seen the effects of "vacation deficit" in his two decades of practice.

When attacked -- then and now -- the body explodes with a stress response that floods it with adrenaline, triggering an increased heart rate, a surge in blood pressure, an amplified respiratory rate, heightened senses and a massive transfer of blood from the internal organs to the muscles. Focus and concentration are in overdrive.

It's a classic "fight or flight" response, says Darst.

But the brain is hardwired to sustain this for 30 minutes tops, says John Medina, a professor in developmental molecular biology at the University of Washington and the author of "Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home and School."

Back in the day, if you survived the tiger attack, you'd go back to your cave and chill for the rest of the day, says Medina.

The trouble with modern times and modern jobs is that people are still programmed to handle stress in short bursts. Jobs, on the other hand, create the same stress reactions, but sustained far longer than people can physiologically and psychologically handle it.

"The tiger either eats you or you get away," Medina says. "At a bad job, you have the saber-toothed tiger at you for decades."

Agrees Darst: "In work, we have a threat and a threat and a threat, but no rest. We have middle managers that give you conflicting information. We have co-workers who lean over your cubicle asking you what was the last movie you saw."

Without the occasional break from stress, the body is subject to all sorts of maladies. Studies show that stress ups your chances of hypertension, coronary artery diseases and strokes. And stress-related symptoms can occur as well. Neck and shoulder pain afflicts stressed workers who are detail-oriented, while workers who tend not to rock the boat suffer from gastrointestinal symptoms such as irritable colon syndrome and upset stomachs. Angry, high-strung types can develop back pain due to stress, according to Darst.

It's not just the body that benefits from time off. The

'80s chart-toppers Loverboy were on to something when they bellowed about "Working for the Weekend," according to University of Rochester psychology professor Richard Ryan, who's studied the effects of Saturday and Sunday on the human psyche.

"You see a pretty large effect on well-being on the weekend," he says, noting that folks don't get sick as much, are happier and have more "energy and vitality."

This effect shows up on vacations as well, says Ryan.

"Jobs are pretty stressful, and you're released from that stress," he says. "At least anecdotally, I think it does a lot of good."

Experts say it doesn't matter so much where you take a vacation as much as actually taking one. Just go to a place that doesn't stress you out.

"The location's not that important in these studies. You could go around the corner," says Arnold Pally, the head of Changebridge Medical Associates in Montville, N.J. "The key thing is getting away, hopefully without the BlackBerry."

How much vacation time do workers need each year? Expert opinion varies.

Medina says an optimal vacation -- one that frees a worker from job stress -- would last a month. A person needs one week to gauge his or her proper equilibrium between "sympathetic" nervous system functions, which occur when a person is stressed, and the "parasympathetic" functions that occur when a person is taking it easy.

A second week is needed simply to slide into that equilibrium. In the final two, a person enjoys this blissful state. Darst says he recommends a week off every three months.

However much time we're taking off, it's not enough, says Pally, adding that the problem is particularly acute among less-affluent workers and highly affluent small business owners.

"These people just don't take real vacation time," he says. "I'm not saying we should turn into France, where they take six weeks a year. But [Americans] are real outliers."

While vacations can add to health and well-being, don't expect miracles. You'll be the same overworked maniac you were before you left soon enough.

"There's a statute of limitations," says Medina.

Avoiding breaks and pains

The formulation is so simple even a caveman running from a saber-toothed tiger could figure it out: Work causes stress. Stress causes health problems.

Stress bad. Vacation good.

But vacations aren't so great if they're stress-inducing themselves, say experts.

"People who think they're going to have a vacation without obstacles -- they're in for it," says Debbie Mandel, author of "Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7-Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life."

"You have to take precautions."

Vacationers often spend too much money, elevating stress-inducing debt. They gain weight. They get sick. They get robbed. For those going abroad, unfamiliar crazy languages and money can cause stress, not to mention getting there to begin with.

"Once there's an airport, factor in stress," says Mandel. "They're notorious for it."

To keep the blood pressure low, a little research about your destination can go a long way, says Mandel. "Do your due diligence. Talk to friends, like-minded spirits. 'Did you like this?'" she says.

Even the most meticulous plans can go awry, so steel yourself. "We can't control the weather and we don't control revolutions," she notes.

You can control whether you tote a BlackBerry along, though. So don't. A report by the Families and Work Institute suggests those who refuse to give up the laptop and the cellphone are more likely to return to the office overwhelmed instead of refreshed.

And there are other ways you may want to consider adding by subtracting.

"I'd argue that if you're regularly pissed off by your family," says "Brain Rules" author John Medina, taking vacation with them is "trading one stress for another."