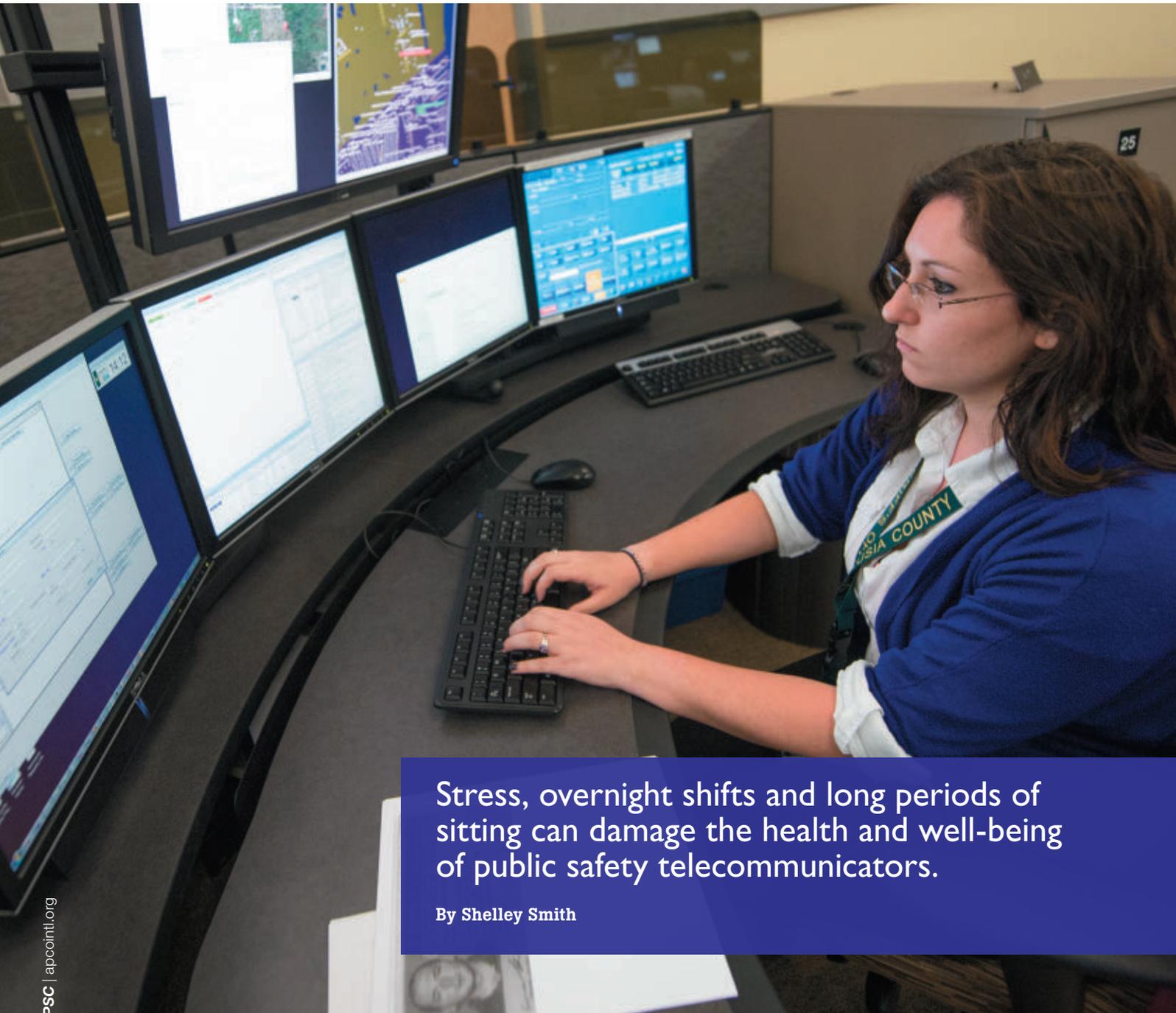


THE HEALTH OF A TELECOMMUNICATOR



Stress, overnight shifts and long periods of sitting can damage the health and well-being of public safety telecommunicators.

By Shelley Smith

Regrettably, we often hear of law enforcement officers being seriously injured in the line of duty. There seems to be no end to the evils that befall our nation's police officers, and too often the consequences are life-changing, leaving law enforcement officers unable to return to duty. In most circumstances telecommunicators are locked up safely in a fortress of computers and phones, but does the job of telecommunicator just as surely pose a physical threat to these unseen first responders?

Telecommunicators work tirelessly to do their part in keeping the communities they work in safe. Long hours, shift work, overtime and sedentary work do not pose the same immediate threat as does a person coming at you with a weapon. But there is still a threat. Every time the phone rings, the unknown is on the other end. Is it a woman who woke up to find her husband of 52 years had passed away during the night as she slept by his side, unaware that the love of her life was gone? Or the anguished pleas for help from a mother who just found her 14-year-old son dead in the bathroom from a self-inflicted gunshot? Maybe it's the sounds of screaming over an open line as the telecommunicator listens intently to each second of the call for any information that can help the units responding as the screams get louder.

All of these scenarios plus countless others, multiplied by days, weeks and years of being a telecommunicator, take a toll on even the most dedicated professional. Telecommunicators must put aside their feelings and emotions to face each emergency with the calm and professional competency that is inherent in the role of telecommunicator. A normal day at work for them is usually the worst day for the public they come into contact with. Telecommunicators are not physically on the scene with their police officers but what they may not see with their eyes, they certainly feel with their hearts. These scenarios will replay in their minds, but what impact does it have on their physical health? What are the long-term effects of a job in which stress is as much a part of your day as breathing?

The American Psychological Association (APA) recognizes a multitude of health complications that arise from long-term workplace stress, which can lead to poor eating habits, which in turn lead to complications like obesity. Often telecommunicators consider the long-term implications of the decisions they make in the course of their duties, but how much consideration do they give to the long-term effects of the decisions that impact their own health? Shift work encourages erratic eating habits. Energy drinks. Countless cups of coffee. Fast food. Trips to the vending machine at 2 a.m. All of these represent poor eating habits, but what is the cumulative effect?

What happens to your body when you carry extra weight? A multitude of health problems are rooted in obesity. The sheer number of complications is overwhelming and include conditions, such as:

- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Sleep apnea
- Depression
- Osteoarthritis
- Diabetes
- Kidney disease
- Cancer
- Gallbladder disease
- Gout

Sadly, this is just a partial list of possible complications, but what does it actually mean for the human body?

According to the Centers for Disease Control, over 35% of U.S. adults are obese. These people carry with them a higher risk of premature death, disability and lower quality of life. Obese people spend 42% more on healthcare costs than a person of healthy weight. Additionally, obesity can lead to depression. It is not uncommon for those extra pounds to weigh heavily on a person and result in feelings of self-doubt. This is often compounded by discrimination and bias in public settings. On the inside, the weight causes excessive stress in the body. A bigger body mass requires the heart to work harder by requiring more blood to be pumped to blood vessels in the extra fat tissue. This also causes higher pressure in the arteries and results in higher blood pressure. The extra weight also forces joints to work harder. Knee problems and back pain often occur. More weight also contributes to coronary artery disease. Fatty deposits build up in the arteries that supply blood to the heart. These narrowed arteries and the decreased blood flow they cause can lead to an increased risk of heart attack or angina. Additionally, blood clots can form and lead to a stroke.

Obesity also leads to an increase in certain cancers. Liver, kidney, pancreatic, breast and ovarian cancers are among the types of cancers that increase in frequency among the obese population. The CDC reports obese individuals are at an increased risk of developing 13 types of cancer, which account for 40% of all cancers diagnosed. The picture painted by obesity isn't a pretty one.

Long-term workplace stress isn't the only challenge facing telecommunicators while performing their duties. Shifts often require personnel to sit at their dispatch console for an extended amount of time. Shifts regularly go from 8 to 12 hours plus. That is a lot of sitting and according to research that's not what the human body was designed to do. Dr. James Levine of the Mayo Clinic believes "We are sitting ourselves to death." Strong words, but the evidence supports the idea that prolonged sitting contributes to many health risks such as decreased circulation, increased weight, heart disease, weakened muscles and chronic body pain. Sitting is often referred to now as the new smoking. This statement reinforces how important it is that emergency telecommunicators pay close attention to their own health.

It's easy when overwhelmed with the complexities of the field of emergency communications to grab that third cup of coffee or second doughnut to help you make it through the shift. But all of these little actions can lead to undesirable results day after day and year after year. A healthy diet, exercise and activity will help combat the stress of the job. Being

mentally prepared and alert at all times is key for emergency communications — both for the officer and the telecommunicator. It's not easy in a communications center environment to always eat healthy foods or get up to move around. The demands of the job often require being tethered to a dispatch console for hours at a time. Bathroom breaks are the closest thing to freedom some may see during a 12-hour shift, but it is important to pay attention to your physical and mental health. Telecommunicators should do this not only for their own sake but for the sake of those they serve.

As telecommunicators, we go above and beyond every day for our callers and police officers; let's not forget to show ourselves the same kind of love. ●

Shelley Smith began her career in emergency communications in 1998 and has over 10 years of experience in law enforcement dispatch. After a pause in her emergency services career to complete her education and pursue her nursing license, Shelley has returned to the field she calls home and is now employed by Fort (AR) Smith EMS as an EMD telecommunicator.

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CDE EXAM #51398

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Obesity leads to an increase in which type of cancer? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Liver Kidney Breast All of the above Fatty deposits build up in the _____ that supplies blood to the heart. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Arteries Veins Cartilage Membranes Health complications can arise from prolonged workplace stress. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> True False According to the CDC, only 10 percent of people are obese. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> True False | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The CDC report that ___ types of cancer show an increased risk in the overweight population. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11 12 13 14 Obese people spend how much more on health care costs? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 25% 86% 19% 42% Blood clots can cause a stroke. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> True False Extended sitting/resting is beneficial to your health. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> True False | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Stress is rare in the field of telecommunications. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> True False Obesity contributes to the following health problems. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Cancer High blood pressure Diabetes All of the above |
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