

Why Sitting Is Bad for You and How to Avoid It

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Overview

Not that long ago, you probably viewed your office chair as just an innocent piece of furniture. Then those headlines started popping up everywhere:

Sitting Is the New Smoking!

Sitting Disease Is on the Rise!

Stop Sitting Before It Kills You!

It turns out that your office chair is not so innocent after all.



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The Health Hazards

Leading experts agree that sitting can cause as many, if not more, negative health effects as smoking. Sitting for long periods of time has been shown to raise the risk of developing diabetes, experiencing a cardiovascular event or getting certain types of cancer.

A 14-year study involving nearly 185,000 participants published in the American Journal of Epidemiology concluded that time spent sitting was independently associated with mortality. Perhaps most startling: This result was true regardless of the participants' physical activity levels. The risks of sitting have become clear enough that the Medical Journal of Australia published an article declaring that prolonged sitting at a desk may be "hazardous" and urging doctors and employers to prescribe or consider alternatives.

Sitting — especially sitting in chairs — takes a heavy toll on health in part because it essentially lets your body shut down. When you plop down in a chair, your muscles disengage, your hips tighten and your spine becomes nearly rigid. Blood flow while in the sitting position is sluggish, which can impact brain function, heart health and even raise the risk of blood clots. Your chair also can cause a dramatic drop in production of fat-burning enzymes and calorie burn.

We simply were not designed to sit in chairs all day. We evolved to be upright and active. When we rise from our chairs, it's like a wake-up call to our bodies. Standing requires more engagement of your muscles and gets your blood flowing. You can become more alert and energized. Your hips are more open and your spine is free to twist.

How to Sit Less

The antidote to sitting all day, however, is not to stand all day. Our bodies respond best when we engage in a variety of movements — walking, standing, bending and even squatting. Finding ways to vary your position can seem challenging in our chair-centric culture. Here are a few creative ways to cut back on your sitting time that you can try right away:

1. Choose a task that will get you standing. Maybe it's talking on the phone, reviewing documents or checking Facebook. Whatever the task, pick it and stick to it. Standing for this task can help to break up long bouts of sitting during the day.

2. Eat one meal a day while standing. Sitting during meals can add hours to your overall sitting time. Try eating breakfast at the kitchen counter, or look for a lunch spot with tall tables. Standing while eating does not mean that you have to eat quickly or make poor food choices. You can savor a meal while on your feet just as well as in a chair.

3. Spend 15 minutes sitting on the floor. In our chair culture, adults do not spend much time sitting on the floor. As a result, we can lose some mobility. Start working to gain that mobility back by spending 15 minutes a day sitting on the floor. If you have kids, they will love to join you to read a story or play a game. Watch the first half of your favorite TV show or catch up on a book.

4. Push your chair to the side of your desk each night. The next morning, your chair's unusual position can act as a reminder to stay on your feet for a bit longer. Try to plan a task for the morning that can be done while standing or walking. By starting the day off on your feet, you can help to wake up your body and keep motivated to be active all day.

With some small reminders, you can be on track to a day with less sitting and more variety of movement. Give the chairs in your life a break and see how much better you feel throughout the day.