

MAKE A move

WHETHER YOU SIT OR STAND FOR HOURS AT A TIME AT WORK,
FINDING WAYS TO MOVE MORE WILL DELIVER HUGE HEALTH
BENEFITS – NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE.

Words Carmel Sparke

Your humble chair may not look like a dangerous piece of equipment, but it could be putting your health at risk. More and more research is being published about how sitting for hours on end raises your chance of developing a range of illnesses and even of dying early.

Australians are parking their bums for, on average, more than nine hours a day – whether that's driving, studying, sitting in front of computer, on public transport, or collapsed in front of the TV.

"Research is now fairly consistent that excessive sitting time is associated with an increased risk of many chronic diseases, mainly heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers," says Professor David Dunstan, head of the Physical Activity Laboratory at the Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute.

SITTING DUCKS

It's not just the overall hours spent inactive that is of concern, but also the patterns of how people sit, says Prof Dunstan.

"It appears the prolonged, uninterrupted sitting for hours and hours carries the greater risk compared to getting up and moving about frequently."

Human bodies like to move, and while sitting or lying (apart from sleep) large muscle groups are inactive, slowing blood circulation and the enzymes involved in moving glucose and fats from the blood.

"When we sit for long periods we really aren't engaging those muscles... there's a huge amount of implications from it," Prof Dunstan says.

He was involved in research that showed the remarkable benefits of breaking up sitting time with just short bouts of regular walking. In a group of overweight people who were sitting, walking for just two minutes every 20 minutes lowered their glucose and insulin levels after a meal, driving down their risks of diabetes and heart disease.

fast fact

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minutes: the estimated time your life expectancy may be reduced for every inactive hour of television watched over the age of 25.

Source: University of Queensland

"So there are tangible health benefits in terms of the risk of some of those major chronic diseases by moving more," Prof Dunstan says.

Researchers are yet to pin down the precise amount of movement time but Prof Dunstan recommends getting up every half hour to fire up those leg and bum muscles. "It's about turning on the engine, and keeping it turned on through the day," he says.

ADJUSTING YOUR DESK SET-UP

If you're spending time studying or in a home or work office, arrange your space so it's comfortable and ergonomically sound. A simple approach is to set up your chair so that your elbows are horizontal on the desk and your feet are flat on the floor, using a footrest if needed.

Your computer screen should be at a distance from you, so that if you reached your arm out with your palm flat, your screen should be there.

Headaches, neck problems and upper back pain are among the first signs that your habits may need attention, says Justine Trethewey, senior physiotherapist at Macquarie Street Physiotherapy in Sydney's CBD.

"Bodies don't like to be static; it's important to try to make time to keep on the move at work," she says. Her rule of thumb is to aim to sit for two thirds of an hour and move for the other third.

"It doesn't have to be for long. Get up every half hour and take the opportunity to talk to someone rather than ring them, to go to the printer, get some water or take the stairs. Use all those sorts of exercise when you can," she says.

You could also break up your sitting time with a couple of stretches (see page 61) to help keep the circulation moving and to lengthen tight muscles.

Maintaining a balanced posture when sitting can help with many common pains. Have your pelvis in a neutral ►





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Movers and shakers

Fire up those big muscle groups with these ideas for office workers from exercise physiologist Drew Harrisberg.

- Go for a walk outside at lunchtime to get the blood

moving. “It wakes up your cardiorespiratory system, it releases feel-good endorphins, and clears your mind of clutter,” says Harrisberg.

- A standing desk can be helpful for some, so long as you do remember to move

from sitting to standing throughout the day and to keep your posture balanced.

- Try an exercise ‘snack’. Think a few squats or tricep dips in your office, or take a walking meeting outside.
- Walk up a flight of stairs

instead of taking the lift, and do two stairs at a time if you need a challenge.

- Have a drink of water every 30 to 60 minutes – preferably from a tap not right next to you so you get some walking in.

position, with your back supported by the chair. Lengthen your neck, so your head is balanced over your torso rather than forward, and your chin is gently tucked in.

POSTURE PERFECT

If you stand at work, it’s just as important to focus on keeping your body moving, and in the correct posture.

Stand evenly on both legs, with two thirds of your weight in your heels, your knees unlocked but not bent and your pelvis in a neutral position. Avoid craning your head forward to look at the computer, or leaning on one hip.

“You could simply imagine you are trying to draw the top of your head towards the ceiling, feeling gently tall,

rather than being rigid, whether you are sitting or standing,” says Trethewey.

“A good test is whether you can breathe normally when you are in good posture. Often we can hold ourselves so rigidly, breathing in a relaxed way is hard.”

STANDING ORDERS

Even if you stand all day, there are health implications to consider. Workers who spend the day on their feet, such as factory workers or those in retail, can be at risk of ill health effects too, with research showing they are also at risk of ongoing back pain and other chronic illnesses.

If you’re standing for more than six hours at a time,



DR DAVID DUNSTAN

Head of the Physical Activity Laboratory at the Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute



DR JUSTINE TRETHEWEY

Physiotherapist

it's important to incorporate movement where possible.

“Just as we would avoid prolonged sitting through the day, we want to avoid prolonged standing for long periods of the day as well,” says Trethewey.

Exercises such as calf raises will boost the body's circulatory system. Staying active when standing, by regularly shifting your weight from foot to foot for example, will also help.

Aim for a good posture, wear comfortable, shock-absorbent footwear and even consider getting a rubber mat to help absorb some of the stress if you stand in one spot for hours on end, Trethewey says.

For workers who are on their feet but on the move, such as nurses, teachers, tradesmen and those in hospitality, other postural factors come into play.

Teachers, for example, often bend forward to look at their students' work. Trethewey suggests kneeling or sitting next to students to make it easier on backs.

If you're lifting a heavy item, be aware of how heavy the load you're about to lift is, engage the tummy muscles and try to use your legs to help you lift, rather than your back.

Whether your job requires you to sit, stand or even move around all day, the message is a simple one from Prof Dunstan: “It's finding ways to get that movement throughout the day – basically moving more.” 🍷

Quick stretches

Break up your sitting time with a couple of simple stretches to lengthen out muscles that have become tight and help keep the circulation moving.

▶ **Chair twist:** Sit on a chair and swivel sideways, hooking your arm over the back of the chair and twisting your upper back, so that your legs stay facing forwards.



◀ **Chin tucks:** Gently tuck your chin in towards your neck and hold for a few seconds.

▶ **Shoulder rolls:** With your arms by your side, move your shoulders in a circular motion, a bit like you are doing backstroke, taking them around a few times.



◀ **Doorway stretch:** Ease tight pectorals, those muscles across the front of your chest, by standing in a doorway with your arms in a 'cactus' position with your elbows in the door jam, bent at 90 degrees. Move a bit forward until you feel a stretch across your pectorals.

