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## The dangers of sitting: why sitting is the new smoking

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### Summary

- Sitting or lying down for too long increases your risk of chronic health problems, such as heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.
  - Too much sitting can also be bad for your mental health.
  - Being active is not as hard as you think. There are lots of simple ways to include some physical activity in your day.
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Living a sedentary lifestyle can be dangerous to your health. The less sitting or lying down you do during the day, the better your chances for living a healthy life.

If you stand or move around during the day, you have a lower risk of early death than if you sit at a desk. If you live a sedentary lifestyle, you have a higher chance of being overweight, developing type 2 diabetes or heart disease, and experiencing depression and anxiety.

### How does a sedentary lifestyle affect your body?

Humans are built to stand upright. Your heart and cardiovascular system work more effectively that way. Your bowel also functions more efficiently when you are upright. It is common for people who are bedridden in hospital to experience problems with their bowel function.

When you are physically active, on the other hand, your overall energy levels and endurance improve, and your bones maintain strength.

### Legs and gluteals (bum muscles)

Sitting for long periods can lead to weakening and wasting away of the large leg and gluteal muscles. These large

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muscles are important for walking and for stabilising you. If these muscles are weak you are more likely to injure yourself from falls, and from strains when you do exercise.

### **Weight**

Moving your muscles helps your body digest the fats and sugars you eat. If you spend a lot of time sitting, digestion is not as efficient, so you retain those fats and sugars as fat in your body.

Even if you exercise but spend a large amount of time sitting, you are still risking health problems, such as **metabolic syndrome**. The latest research suggests you need 60–75 minutes per day of moderate-intensity activity to combat the dangers of excessive sitting.

### **Hips and back**

Just like your legs and gluteals, your hips and back will not support you as well if you sit for long periods. Sitting causes your hip flexor muscles to shorten, which can lead to problems with your hip joints.

Sitting for long periods can also cause problems with your back, especially if you consistently sit with poor **posture** or don't use an ergonomically designed chair or workstation. Poor posture may also cause poor spine health such as **compression in the discs** in your spine, leading to premature degeneration, which can be very painful.

### **Anxiety and depression**

We don't understand the links between sitting and mental health as well as we do the links between sitting and physical health yet, but we do know that the risk of both anxiety and depression is higher in people that sit more.

This might be because people who spend a lot of time sitting are missing the positive effects of physical activity and fitness. If so, getting up and moving may help.

### **Cancer**

Emerging studies suggest the dangers of sitting include increasing your chances of developing some types of cancer, including lung, uterine, and colon cancers. The reason behind this is not yet known.

### **Heart disease**

Sitting for long periods has been linked to heart disease. One study found that men who watch more than 23 hours of television a week have a 64 per cent higher risk of dying from cardiovascular disease than men who only watch 11 hours of television a week.

Some experts say that people who are inactive and sit for long periods have a 147 per cent higher risk of suffering a heart attack or stroke.

### **Diabetes**

Studies have shown that even five days lying in bed can lead to increased insulin resistance in your body (this will cause your blood sugars to increase above what is healthy). Research suggests that people who spend more time sitting have a 112 per cent higher risk of diabetes.

### **Varicose veins**

Sitting for long periods can lead to **varicose veins or spider veins** (a smaller version of varicose veins). This is because sitting causes blood to pool in your legs.

Varicose veins aren't usually dangerous. In rare cases, they can lead to blood clots, which can cause serious problems (see deep vein thrombosis, below).

### **Deep vein thrombosis**

Sitting for too long can cause **deep vein thrombosis** (DVT), for example on a long plane or car trip. A deep vein thrombosis is a blood clot that forms in the veins of your leg.

DVT is a serious problem, because if part of a blood clot in the leg vein breaks off and travels, it can cut off the blood flow to other parts of the body, including your lungs, which can cause a pulmonary embolism. This is a medical emergency that can lead to major complications or even death.

## Stiff neck and shoulders

If you spend your time hunched over a computer keyboard, this can lead to pain and stiffness in your neck and shoulders.

## How sedentary are we?

Physical inactivity contributes to over three million preventable deaths worldwide each year (that's six per cent of all deaths). It is the fourth leading cause of death due to non-communicable diseases.

It's also the cause of 21–25 per cent of breast and colon cancers, 27 per cent of diabetes cases, and around 30 per cent of ischaemic heart disease. In fact, physical inactivity is the second highest cause of cancer in Australia, behind tobacco smoking.

The Australian Health Survey 2011–12 results show:

- 60 per cent of Australian adults do less than the recommended 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity each day.
- Only one third of Australian children, and one in 10 young people (aged 5–17), do the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity every day.
- Fewer than one in three children and young people have no more than two hours of screen time each day.
- Almost 70 per cent of Australian adults can be classed as either sedentary or having low levels of physical activity.

## Children and young people

The Australian Health Survey found that toddlers and pre-schoolers (aged 2–4 years) spent an average of six hours a day doing some form of physical activity, and one and a half hours having some form of screen time.

These numbers changed dramatically when the survey looked at children and young people (aged 5–17 years). They spend just one and a half hours a day doing physical activities, and over two hours each day on screen time.

The time spent on physical activity grew smaller as the young people got older, while the time spent on screen-based activities grew higher.

Just under half of all children and young people (aged 2–17) had at least one type of screen (such as a television, computer, or game console) in their bedroom. That figure grew to three quarters for young people aged 15–17.

The 15–17 year age group were the least likely to walk 12,000 steps each day, with only 7 per cent reaching that goal. Younger children, aged 5–11, were much more likely to walk more during their day (at around 23 per cent).

## Adults

The Australian Health Survey found that young adults achieved the highest level of activity of all adults, with 53 per cent of 18–24 year olds being classed as sufficiently active.

People tended to become less active as they aged. The lowest level of activity was among those aged 75 or over, with that group achieving around 20 minutes of activity each day.

Only one in four people aged 75 or over were classed as sufficiently active against Australia's **Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines**.

People were more likely to have done sufficient exercise if they:

- were wealthier
- classified their health as 'excellent'
- were in the underweight or normal range of body mass index, rather than the obese range
- did not smoke or had given up smoking
- did not have a job where they sat down a lot, such as clerical or administrative work
- watched less television and used the internet less than average (13 hours and 9 hours per week, respectively).

Adults took an average of 7,400 steps per day. Less than one in five adults took 10,000 steps each day.

## How can you save your health from the dangers of sitting?

If you're not getting enough activity in your day, it's not too late to turn it around and gain great health benefits in the process.

### Build more activity into your day

Some ways you can incorporate activity into your day are:

- Walk or cycle, and leave the car at home.
- For longer trips, walk or cycle part of the way.
- Use the stairs instead of the lift or escalator, or at least walk up the escalator.
- Get off the bus one stop early and walk the rest of the way.
- Park further away from wherever you're going and walk the rest of the way.
- Calculate how long it takes you to walk one kilometre – you may find you can reach your destination faster by walking than if you wait for public transport.

### Be active (and safe)

If you're new to physical activity, or if you have a health condition, speak to your doctor before you start any new activities. They can help you decide the best activities for you. Read more about [\*\*physical activity and how to get started\*\*](#).

Search for your local [\*\*Registered Exercise Professional\*\*](#) or [\*\*Registered Fitness Business\*\*](#) for professional advice and ongoing support.

If you're getting active outdoors, remember to protect yourself from the sun by applying sunscreen and wearing sun-protective clothing, including a hat.

### Be active at work

You can move around at work more than you think:

- Take the stairs instead of the lift.
- Walk over and talk to your colleagues instead of emailing them.
- Take your lunch break away from your desk and enjoy a short walk outside if you can.
- Organise walking meetings.

### Be active indoors

Don't let bad weather stop you from being active! You can do body weight exercises such as squats, sit-ups, and lunges.

You can also try indoor activities such as:

- dancing
- swimming at an indoor pool
- yoga
- pilates
- martial arts
- squash
- indoor rock climbing.

### Reduce your sedentary behaviour

Here are some simple ideas to keep you moving while you're at home:

- When you're tidying up, put items away in small trips rather than taking it all together.
- Set the timer on your television to turn off an hour earlier than usual to remind you to get up and move.
- Walk around when you're on the phone.

- Stand up and do some ironing during your favourite television shows.
- Rather than sitting down to read, listen to recorded books while you walk, clean, or work in the garden.
- Stand on public transport, or get off one stop early and walk to your destination.

If you work in an office:

- Stand up while you read emails or reports.
- Move your rubbish bin away from your desk so you have to get up to throw anything away.
- Use the speaker phone for conference calls and walk around the room during the calls.

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