

Get off your seat! Too much sitting can harm your health

By Natalie McGill

After a long day at your desk or a rough commute in your car, the thought of slinking into a comfortable chair and watching TV might sound relaxing.

But if you already spent chunks of your day sitting in one place, that comfortable chair may do you more harm than good.

Research shows that sitting for long periods of time can affect your metabolism and body fat. That can lead to higher risks for cardiovascular problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease and even early death, says JoEllen Wilbur, PhD, associate dean for research and professor at the College of Nursing at Rush University and a National Institute of Nursing Research-supported scientist.

While no one can escape the health risks of sitting, the risk increases for people already in poor health and as you age. For every hour of sedentary behavior, the risk of disability doubles in adults age 60 and older, according to recent National Institutes of Health-funded research.



“Those individuals who work at a desk, or students who are studying for long hours, or playing video games or watching TV, they’re often not even aware of how many minutes or hours they may be spending doing these activities,” Wilbur says.

If you think you may be doing too much sitting, then the first thing to do is find out exactly how long you’re doing it, Wilbur says.

Start by tracking how long you spend in front of the TV or a computer. You may be surprised by how much time you spend sitting, Wilbur says.

Even if you’re someone who spends time doing daily high-intensity physical activity, such as running for an hour a day, you should still ask yourself how you’re spending the rest of the day when you’re not exercising, Wilbur says.

If you’re sitting in your office for a long time, set a timer to remind yourself to move around, Wilbur says. Try standing at your desk, or walking around your office while listening to a portable music player.

“Just a minute of movement that is light activity is helpful and provides some benefits,” Wilbur says.

Wilbur says you should aim for 150 minutes a week of moderate physical activity, such as a brisk walk. But you can reach this goal in small bouts of physical activity, she says.

“I think there’s a lot of texting that goes on or emails go back and forth,” Wilbur says. “Get up, move and ask the question or talk to an individual rather than texting or emailing.”

There are other ways to increase your activity after a long day of sitting. After driving to the grocery store, try walking around the store to get yourself moving, Wilbur says. After you’re done shopping, take the shopping cart all the way back to the storefront instead of leaving it near your car or in a parking lot collection spot.

If you’ve been sitting awhile on a bus, get off at the stop a block before your house for extra walking time, she says.



Take a break from sitting

Instead of calling, e-mailing or instant messaging your colleagues, get up off your chair and go talk to them face-to-face.

“I tell people who have forgotten their keys that’s a plus — you get an opportunity to go up the stairs a second time and get a little more activity into your life,” Wilbur says.

If you’re the parent of a child who is prone to sitting, try limiting the amount of time she or he spends watching TV or using a computer. The federal Let’s Move! campaign suggests walking around your neighborhood with your child after a meal or making a choice to move around in any way during a commercial break on TV. Parents can also encourage their kids to join a sports team, or give them toys that encourage movement, such as a jump rope.

With more movement, you’ll begin to feel better physically and emotionally. Research says physical activity can help improve mental health. You are also less likely to eat unhealthy foods that are higher in fats and sugar when you’re moving around as opposed to constantly sitting, Wilbur says.

>> For more physical activity tips, see www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity



Take the stairs, take a stand

If you are someone who constantly sits but want to become more active, then you should start light, start low and build over time, Wilbur says. At your job, take the stairs instead of the elevator. Start with one flight of stairs and work your way to more as you get used to increased activity, she says.

If you have projects that can be done standing up, get off your chair and work upright for awhile. Set a timer to go off once an hour to remind you to stand up. Another option is to install a standing desk.



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