

Problems Associated with Prolonged Sitting



The majority of Americans are sedentary. They spend about 60 percent of the waking day on activities sitting down. That includes sitting while eating, commuting, using a computer, or watching TV. When they aren't sitting, they do light activities like standing and walking.



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Office workers have it even worse. They sit for more than 75 percent of their work hours. It is common for them to sit for more than 30 minutes at a time. Labor-saving devices invented over the last 40 years have resulted in a 43 percent increase in sitting in the United States.

Sitting too much can be bad for your health. Studies show that total sitting time increases the risk of dying from all causes. Sitting especially increases the risk of death from cardiovascular disease. Sitting also is linked to obesity, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

The body adapts to its usual level of activity. For instance, the body adapts to regular exercise. The body can also adapt to inactivity. Don't lift weights regularly? Then your body does not need stronger muscles. In the same way, a lack of regular aerobic exercise means the body does not need a higher fitness level. Inactive muscles cause changes at the cell level. These changes can worsen levels of fat, cholesterol, sugar, and insulin in the blood. This increases the risk of developing cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

Being physically active does not reduce the risk of also being sedentary. Being regularly active has health benefits. But you may still be at risk for health problems if the rest of your week

is spent sitting. Inactive people increase their risk even more by prolonged sitting. Therefore, you need to be both more active and less inactive.

How much less inactive do we need to be? More research is needed to provide precise guidelines. However, taking short breaks from sitting is beneficial. Even just five minutes an hour helps. You don't need to do hard exercise during these breaks either. Just activate the muscles. One large study of men and women aged 59-82 years showed a lower risk of dying by replacing just one hour of sitting time each day with some activity. The impact was more obvious for less active adults.

Evidence suggests both aerobic and strength exercises help. So try to do both. If you are just starting out, do more aerobic exercise. Over time, add resistance workouts. Doing both types will bring even more benefits for your overall health and fitness.

Getting Started

- Take all medicines prescribed by your doctor.
- Begin slowly and carefully. This is especially important the older, less fit, and more inactive you have been.
- Look for ways to interrupt your sitting. For example, a 30-minute TV program has 9 to 12 minutes of commercials. Don't watch them sitting down. Instead, stand up and move around the room. In the office, don't email or call coworkers. Instead, get up and walk over to their desks.
- Find activities to build into your daily life. Try to stand while doing some activities. Even ones that you usually do while sitting.
- Don't just limit your sitting time. Also add more exercise to your schedule. Look for programs in your community. You could also contact an appropriately credentialed exercise professional* to help you. All you really need, though, is a good pair of shoes to get started walking.
- Using a pedometer or other device to track your progress. Slowly work toward a goal, like maybe 10,000 steps per day.

Aerobic and Resistance Exercise

As mentioned above, there is not enough research to provide definitive guidelines on the amount of inactivity that is okay or

which activities to add. However, some general rules will help you find ways to be less inactive. The key is to avoid situations with prolonged sitting. If you have to sit for a long time, find ways to stand up and walk around.

- Frequency and Time – Some studies suggest at least five minutes of activity for each hour of sitting. This does not have to be all at once. Getting up often for one to two minutes each time is probably just as good.
- Intensity – Exercise at a moderate level.
- Type – Do rhythmic exercises with the large muscle groups. Try standing, walking, or climbing stairs. Also do resistance exercises with the major muscle groups. Choose activities of daily living that require some lifting. You also can use light weights, resistance bands, or your body as the resistance. Try push-ups or sit-ups. Just be sure to contract the muscles, especially those of the lower body.

Becoming less inactive will not require a lot of effort. Don't worry about risks of overexertion. Just do daily activities standing up that you might normally do sitting.

Also consider becoming more active on a regular basis. Design your exercise program for maximum benefit and minimum risk to your health and physical condition. Consider reaching out to an appropriately credentialed exercise professional to work with you and your doctor. Together, you can establish realistic goals and design a safe, effective, and enjoyable program.

For more information, visit www.exerciseismedicine.org or e-mail eim@acsm.org.

*A listing of exercise professionals can be found at www.usreps.org and EIM Credentialed professionals can be found through the ACSM ProFinder (<http://bit.ly/1Mq6ldN>).

Referral Instructions