

Things That Happen to Your Body When You Sit All Day — and How to Counteract Them

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Hard to admit, but easy to believe: Eight in 10 Americans spend nearly every single minute of their workday sitting behind a desk.

"The problems are not with sitting, but with passively sitting," says Mark Schneider, a personal trainer at Movement Minneapolis. "Sitting is easy. If it took effort, fewer people would do it."

The health impact. By sitting all day, you're subjecting your body to a whole lot of consequences.

Your Muscles Will Ache — Like, All the Time

Tune in to how you're sitting as you read this paragraph. Wait! Don't move a muscle quite yet. Just sit still. Ask yourself: How does the seat feel? How is your head angled and where are your feet placed? How do the arm rests impact your arm alignment?

"The lack of attention to these things is what causes the problem. Sitting well, so it has minimal negative effects on you, is a skill. And like any skill it will take some effort to learn but eventually will become habitual," Schneider says.

Be mindful of your posture and adjust alignment as needed. "While standing, your ear, shoulder, hip, knee, and ankle should form a straight line with the spine in an 'S' shape, due to its natural curvature. This also applies while in a seated position, except that the ear, shoulder, and hip should align, and the knee and ankle should align."

Until you master pro-level sitting, expect tight hip muscles, increased back and neck pain, and possible breathing difficulties, because the rounded-shoulder, tucked-chin posture decreases your ribs' ability to expand.

You're 2 ½ Times More Likely to Struggle With Obesity

As mentioned above, while sitting, your calorie-burning potential becomes super-slow. In fact, ACE reports you're more than twice as likely to be obese if you sit for six hours per day compared to just 30 minutes per day.

Your Risk for Cancer, Type 2 Diabetes, and Cardiovascular Disease Will Climb

Beyond causing you to gain extra pounds, sitting too much can also do a number on your longevity. "Sitting increases risk of death up to 40 percent. Inactivity is killing people and is arguably one of this generation's greatest health threats,". Cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease risks are more stark when overall physical activity levels are low, too.

Your Overall Mortality Risk Jumps

Nearly 4 percent of all deaths can be traced back to sitting too much. Sitting less than three hours a day can add two years to your life. On the flip side, sitting for more than six hours (and only racking up a limited amount of exercise) can raise your overall risk of death by 94 percent.

Fortunately, You're Not Entirely Screwed If You Have a Desk Job (or you are a Student)

Standing up at regular intervals can cut disease risk. "Be sure to frequently adjust your position while sitting for long periods of time to help prevent slouching and other poor postures. Taking a few minutes periodically to get up from your desk and walk around is so beneficial," Matthews says. Schneider recommends aiming for a total of 10,000 to 13,000 steps per day.

"Our bodies were not meant to sit and be still all day long. Get up every hour. Move your body however you see fit, and stretch twice a day to bring strength to the surrounding muscles and hip joints," says Stephanie Thielen, a personal training expert for ACE.

Also, be sure to get your workout in — this flexibility and strength workout can also balance out the areas that are weakened by super-sized amounts of sitting.

"Judge timing based on your mental ability to focus, about every 45 to 75 minutes. This will likely be a natural break in your ability to focus and a great time to move around without negatively affecting your work. You might see an increase in productivity, actually," Schneider says.

If you need an extra nudge, set a timer and take a lap around the building each time the alarm rings. Start a competition with coworkers to see who can outstep the rest to stick with the program.

Stretching, standing, and walking can't cure all, though. You need to tally up 60 to 75 minutes of moderately intense activity per day to balance out the wellness woes of sitting eight hours each day.