

Research Recommends Getting Bums off Seats

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Sitting for long periods can be bad for your health, even if you exercise regularly.

Recent scientific research has found that sitting switches off the body's ability to burn fat and slows down the metabolism.

The negative health effects of sedentary behaviour, such as watching television or sitting at a desk all day, was one of the topics up for discussion at ANA's conference.

The findings are from a report that reviews multiple studies that found inactivity and in particular prolonged periods spent sitting, increase the risk of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and early death.

Co-author, Grant Schofield, Professor of Public Health at Auckland's AUT, says the findings are a wake-up call, even for regular exercisers.

"We've known for a long time that exercise is good for us, that's a no brainer but the new finding here is that long periods of sitting have detrimental effects on our health *independent* of exercise. In other words, even if you exercise, but spend most of your day sitting, you are at increased health risk, especially from obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes."

Professor Schofield says the human body works best when people are constantly physically active. That's what burns up calories. But he says modern life encourages us to sit for long periods, in cars, at desks and in front of TV or electronic gadgets. He says there is increasing consensus that this is bad for our health.

"Studies have shown that people who begin working as bus drivers or in call centres, where they're sitting all day, gain an average of six kilograms in their first six months of employment."

In response to the findings, some American offices have now installed treadmill desks that allow employees to walk as they work on their computers.

Professor Schofield concedes New Zealand probably isn't ready for that but says much could be done to address our desk-bound work culture and the time we spend watching TV. A recent survey found that on average New Zealanders spent about two hours a day watching television.

"In NZ we need to think about not just getting out and exercising. It's about what you do all day. It's about breaking up that sitting time with activity."

The report's recommendations about what people can do to be more active in the workplace include:

- Using vertical or height-adjustable work stations so employees can stand for part of the day while working on computers.
- Encouraging staff to 'walk and talk' by moving about the workplace while communicating and talking face to face rather than using phones and emails.

- Encouraging desk-bound employees to take breaks and move around.

Recommendations for expending more energy at home include:

- Watching less TV or getting up and active in the ad breaks.
- Viewing household chores as an excuse to expend energy.
- Getting rid of labour saving devices and going back to beating an egg with a hand beater or ditching the garage door remote so you have to open the door manually.
- When socialising with friends, consider options that include movement like grabbing a coffee-to-go and walking while you talk.

The report says there is now sufficient scientific evidence to understand that sedentary behaviour is a health risk factor and calls for the health sector to address the issue in their policies, programmes and research.

For further information:

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