

Too much sitting bad for health – even if you exercise

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Too much time spent sitting is bad for our health – even if we're getting adequate exercise, according to an expert on the effects of physical activity in the prevention and management of chronic diseases.

Associate Professor David Dunstan, from the Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute in Melbourne, has told the Agencies for Nutrition Action national conference in Auckland that incidental activity (muscle movement) has slowly been eroded from most of our lives.

"Most of us simply move from chair to chair throughout the day – from eating breakfast to sitting in the car, to an office chair, and back home to sit in a chair watching television.

"That's a huge volume of physical activity that we've lost over the 16 hour period that we're awake."

Professor Dunstan says muscle contractions are vital for many of the body's regulatory processes, including helping to regulate blood glucose levels over the day, and people who sit less have lower blood glucose levels.

"I guess that we've been a bit short sighted in public health by putting all our eggs in one message of '30 to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise' when it constitutes such a small proportion of the day.

"Evidence from population studies suggests that the good effects of achieving the minimum amounts of exercise needed for improved health are likely to be eroded if you spend the other 15 and a half hours a day sitting or moving only slightly.

But he says there are decades of evidence showing that people who exercise are healthier. "So this isn't instead of that. We're really trying to push this notion of adopting a 'whole of day' approach to physical activity promotion."

He says there needs to be more research, but there are reasonable grounds to believe that sitting less is better for our health. "You use more muscles to keep yourself standing and even more when you move around. Some studies suggest that the energy we use to stand is as much as double that we use to sit."

He says workplaces need to take the lead in providing more opportunities for people to move more across a large number of hours in the day.

"It could include simple changes such as locating printers at the furthest end of the office, ensuring staff have headsets to give them the flexibility to stand and move about, stationary bikes replacing some traditional office chairs when reading documents, reminders to use the stairs, and meetings held on the move.

“It’s not going to be successful if we simply rely on individuals to change their behaviour. People work under organisational structures, so we need organisational structural changes in the same way that employees are now protected from passive smoking.”

He cites the example of a call centre worker wanting to get up every 30 minutes or so to move around. “At the moment they’re likely to have a manager behind them saying ‘you must meet your targets and cannot move from your chair’.

“Both employers and government have a responsibility to provide greater awareness and positive options to reduce too much sitting at work. The introduction of simple initiatives now could prove a cost-efficient way to address significant health problems in the workforce, and in the wider community, in the future.”

Ends



Professor David Dunstan

Associate Professor Dunstan is Australian Research Council Future Fellow and is the Head of the Physical Activity laboratory in the Division of Metabolism and Obesity at Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute.

He is a leading researcher on the role of physical activity in the prevention and management of type 2 diabetes. He is also the creator of the ‘Lift for Life[®]’ physical activity programme which has been designed to facilitate widespread uptake of strength training in community facilities such as gyms and community health centres. In 2007, he was awarded a prestigious ‘Young Tall Poppy Science Award’ (Victoria) from the Australian Institute of Policy and Science, which recognises the achievements of Australia’s outstanding young scientific researchers.