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Take a stand against sitting

Commentary: With desks the central point for getting work done, employers often focus on having employees sit at their workstations to complete assigned tasks the entire day. Encouraging employees to stand, stretch, and walk around is counterintuitive.

Yet there are compelling reasons to encourage office workers to break up long periods of sedentary behavior. Thousands of articles in research journals document dangers of sitting too much, even for people who get recommended levels of moderate to vigorous physical exercise. This critical information is getting increasing attention as employers seek innovative ways to impact employee health, productivity and satisfaction.

Also see: [5 ways to drive healthy behavior change virtually](#)

Researchers have described impressive risks from sitting for hours on end. Various studies come up with somewhat different numbers, but the bottom line points in the same direction. For example, a review of 47 other studies, published in 2015 in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, reports the following higher risks for undesirable health outcomes in people who sat too much during the time period of the studies:

- 24% higher risk of dying from any cause;
- Risk of having cardiovascular disease increased by 14%, while risk of having cancer increased by 13%;
- Risk of diabetes almost doubled!



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Why being sedentary is harmful

The polite thing to do in many business and personal settings is to offer a visitor a chair. Sitting is seen as relaxing and effortless. So how does sedentary time do its damage? Scientists have discovered several of the mechanisms.

Prolonged sitting changes human metabolism, especially glucose metabolism. Idle muscles lose tone and don't respond well to insulin. So the pancreas produces more insulin to try to elicit a response from the muscles to take up blood glucose. This shift to producing increasing amounts of insulin contributes to the dynamic of diabetes development.

Sitting leads to sluggish blood flow. Fluid can pool in the legs. Arteries become less flexible and have a decreased ability to dilate, further harming the blood vessels. Fat cells may become deformed and stiff with prolonged pressure, which occurs with uninterrupted stretches of sitting.

Get employees moving

Interventions to get employees away from their desks – or at least out of their chairs – are a win-win, benefiting both employers and workers. Organizations can encourage light movement, such as standing, gentle stretching, and walking about the office, throughout the day. The goal of this slow motion activity is not to substitute for moderate to vigorous exercise, which is still desirable for additional healthy outcomes. Instead, the light movement is intended to counter the adverse effects of sitting for too long.

Education is the first step in any program to encourage employees to be less sedentary. Because sitting seems harmless, or even desirable, and is generally the cultural norm, sitting will be a habitual choice that most employees won't even question. Without knowledge of the risks of sitting, people are not likely to see any reason to do anything else. The goal of education is not to frighten employees. Instead, employers should highlight the benefits of light activity. Employees should be shown ergonomic postures for both sitting and standing. Lunch and Learns, emails, meetings, posters, home mailings, and more, can all be used to get the word out.

Education alone, however, is unlikely to be enough to significantly affect workplace behavior. Employees need to form new daily habits. This will be facilitated by making getting out of their chairs convenient, encouraged by managers, and a part of the company's culture.

Also see: [Workplace culture more important benefit than wellness](#)

Sit-stand desks, or adjustable workstations that hold the employee's monitor and keyboard and go up and down with the push of a button, are excellent ways to make getting out of the chair convenient while still getting work done. This strategy gives employees the choice of when to sit and when to stand, adjusting to their own body's reactions. Researchers have found that neither prolonged sitting nor uninterrupted standing is ideal – it's best to alternate.

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[ment into workdays of sedentary employees](#)

ond mere standing. This can take the form of gentle stretching, walking
get up to get a drink, use the restroom, or consult with a colleague.
ive, and can take the form of calendar alerts, emails, texts, or alarms on a
e positive reinforcement for these choices, and need to be trained to not tell
employees to just go sit down and get to work.

Benefits from less sedentary time can happen quickly. For example, one study of office workers compared a week during which the employees sat all day with a week when they sat half the time and stood half the time, using sit-stand workstations. During the week that mixed sitting and standing, employees reported significant reductions in fatigue and lower back discomfort. And most importantly, their productivity did not suffer.

Introducing more movement into the workplace is an evidence-based way to strengthen wellness programs and impact employee health. Research findings indicate these programs, when properly implemented, will be valuable and appreciated.

Janice Stanger, Ph.D., is a health insurance professional with EPIC, and has more than 30 years of experience in employee benefits with leading consulting firms and insurers. She supports clients in the design, implementation and analysis of innovative medical and wellness programs.

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