Up and At 'Em!

One of the best resolutions you could make this year is to stand up and get moving. New research has found that our sedentary habits at home and on the job dramatically raise the risk for common chronic diseases, even in people who exercise regularly.

The current CDC guidelines for adults call for 30 minutes of moderate-intensity cardio (a brisk walk will do) five days a week plus two or more weekly sessions of muscle-strengthening activities. The guidelines are not unreasonable and more and more people are striving to meet them. But that may not be enough.

In a sobering 2011 report, the American College of Sports Medicine, the largest exercise science organization in the world, singled out a sedentary lifestyle as a disease risk factor, regardless of whether people are getting the recommended amount of exercise. Their report was based on research conducted in Canada that looked at 17,000 subjects between the ages of 18 and 90.

That’s right. You might play hockey five hours a week, but if you sit at a desk all day long you could still be endangering your health. Physical activity does not cancel out the ill effects of prolonged sitting. Researchers at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge estimate that if people sat for less than three hours a day, the average life expectancy in the U.S. would be 80.5 years instead of the current 78.5 years.

It’s easy to understand why sitting in a chair all day won’t extend your lifespan, but why does prolonged sitting have such a negative affect? Scientists think that too much sitting impairs the body’s ability to move fat from the bloodstream into the body. These constantly elevated blood fats pose a significant risk factor for heart disease.

Researchers have also found that too much sitting impairs the healthy functioning of HDL or “good” cholesterol. The muscle activity needed for standing, stretching and other movements seems to trigger important processes related to the breakdown of fats and sugars within the body. When you sit, these processes stall. When you’re standing or actively moving, the processes rev back up.
Adults spend 60 percent or more of their waking hours sedentary, according to a 2010 review conducted by researchers from Australia and the United States. For many of us, the hours spent at work at our desks make up the better part of the daily sitting tally. The minutes spent in the car or on the bus, watching TV or playing video games, reading a book or checking Facebook quickly add to the hours spent seated each day.

Too much television watching appears to increase the risk for obesity and diabetes. A 2003 study found that for every two hours a day spent watching television, there is a 23 percent increase in obesity and a 14 percent increase in the risk of type 2 diabetes. Dr. Frank B. Hu of the Harvard School of Public Health has ventured several explanations for the increased risks. People watching TV have a lower metabolic rate than people engaged in other activities like reading or playing board games, he said. Perhaps more significant, they are more likely to be eating as they watch.

Obviously we can’t all quit our desk jobs and join the circus or take up another physically demanding profession to keep from sitting all day. Research seems to show that by breaking up long periods of sitting still, you can partly counteract the negative effects of a sedentary lifestyle. “My recommendation from the research is that trying to get up at least once an hour would be a good thing,” says Columbia University professor and movement sciences expert Dr. Carol Ewing Garber. “Every 30 to 60 minutes, get up while you’re talking on the phone, just for a minute or two.”

The American College of Sports Medicine encourages everyone to create a “get active action plan” that identifies different movements that fit into your workday. Check out their list of 10 active ideas and add the ones that best fit your work routine.

1. Take a walk break every time you take a coffee break.
2. Do some leisurely walking with colleagues after you eat lunch together.
3. Stand up and move whenever you have a drink of water.
4. Whenever possible stand up as opposed to sitting down.
5. Stand up and talk on business phone calls.
6. Stop at the park on your way home from work and take a walk.
7. Walk to a co-worker’s desk instead of emailing or calling him or her.
8. Walk briskly when headed to meetings.
9. Take the stairs whenever you can.
10. If you work at a desk for long periods of time, try a standing desk — or improvise with a high table.

Sedentary behavior has been identified as a risk for heart disease and type 2 diabetes. As the hazards of prolonged sitting become better known, we can expect that people will begin to find ways to include more physical activity opportunities in their daily routine.

Resources:
www.acsm.org
http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/everyone/guidelines/adults.html

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