

## **Sitting Is the New Smoking**

Ed had been sitting for over an hour, sweating his way through end-of-month paperwork when he realized that he was just looking at words and numbers without really thinking about them. “Shoot!” he thought, “My head feels fuzzy. I need to get up and walk around a bit.”

He got up and walked down the hall, taking the long way to the rest room. When he got back to his desk and sat down, he felt refreshed and more alert. “Now,” he said, focusing, “Where was I?”

### **What Happened to Ed?**

As Ed sat and worked for an hour, his body slowly began to change:

- The blood flow to his brain began to slow, eventually affecting his concentration;
- The rate at which his body burns calories slowed, which over time can put him at risk for obesity (a typical office worker gains 16 pounds within 8 months of starting a sedentary job);
- Ed’s “good” cholesterol (HDL) levels decrease and his “bad” cholesterol (LDL) levels increase;
- His body’s ability to regulate blood pressure diminishes, which can lead to blood pressure problems;
- His back and neck muscles, tendons, ligaments and other tissues around them can distort through lack of movement, leading to back and neck problems;
- The muscles that hold Ed upright weaken, putting him at risk when he uses them strenuously – this is often the source of “weekend warrior” injuries.

The effects of prolonged sitting on your body are not usually noticeable, but they build up more quickly than you’d think. This is why, after sitting for an hour or so, you feel the need to stand up, stretch, and move around. Moving around for as little as 5-10 minutes improves the blood flow to your brain. That’s why, when you return to your desk after even a short walk, you feel rejuvenated and are back to being productive.

### **What Has Changed?**

A hundred years ago, most of our grandparents and great-grandparents led a much more physically active life style out of necessity. Most people earned their living working manually at much more strenuous jobs than we do now.

When you think about it, even though our brains are active, many of us are almost completely sedentary. We drive or ride public transportation to work, spend far more time sitting (often in front of a computer screen) at work, and then spend more screen time after work. That means we've gone from spending 12 to 14 hours a day on our feet to basically sitting for that same amount of time. What could possibly go wrong?

### **It Sounds Bad Because It *Is* Bad**

Lack of activity puts a person at much higher risk for almost all of the major health problems, such as heart disease, cancer, dementia, and more. There are two issues that make a sedentary lifestyle particularly tricky.

- 1. The Slow Creep**

Most of the effects of a sedentary lifestyle don't show up clearly from day to day. They are cumulative and, over time, make you more susceptible to a variety of illnesses and injuries.

- 2. The Independent Risk Factor**

The negative effects of a sedentary lifestyle occur regardless of your diet, fitness level, overall health, or workout routines. You may be a vegetarian, run five miles a day followed by an hour of strength training, but if you are sedentary the other 12-14 waking hours, you can still end up with some unpleasant combination of the negative health issues we've looked at.

### **The N-E-A-T Solution**

NEAT is an acronym for "Non-Exercise Activity Thermogenesis" – a twenty-dollar phrase that actually refers to the calories you burn simply by moving around throughout your day. Walking (from room to room, car to store, etc.), doing chores, shopping, gardening, making dinner, etc. – all of these activities burn a surprising number of calories.

The treatment, then, that will counteract the negative effects of the sedentary lifestyle so many of us have doesn't actually cost anything, doesn't require gym fees and equipment, and is readily available.

Just make a point to move more during your waking hours.

## **Off Your Seat and On Your Feet**

Here are some simple suggestions for ways to put more movement in your daily life:

- Get a pedometer (probably already have one if you have a smart phone), a FitBit, Garmin, etc. Wear it all day as you find time to take short walks, park your car further from the door, or take a stroll after supper. Watch those steps add up.
- At least once an hour, take a break from sitting. Stand up, stretch, walk down the hall, reach down for your toes.
- Take the stairs instead of an elevator or escalator, whenever and wherever possible.
- Take the “long cut” on your walks instead of the short cut.
- Be more active by being more useful: instead of dreading huge weekend chores, break them down into smaller pieces and do one small piece every day.
- Convert meetings from “sedentary” to “active” by making them walk-and-talk meetings.
- Consider using a stand-up desk.

## **Old Wine in New Bottles**

The idea that activity is good for you and inactivity is bad for you isn't new. Over two thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher Plato said, “Lack of activity destroys the good condition of every human being, while movement...saves it and preserves it.”

More recently, the British statesman, Edward Stanley, added, “Those who think they have not time for bodily exercise will sooner or later have to find time for illness.”

You get the idea: sit less, move more.