

# Stand up for health

Sitting down for long periods can be bad for you, writes **Michelle Pountney**

THOUGH it might not feel like it after a long day at the office, missing out on a seat on packed peak-hour public transport is actually a good thing.

Hours spent sitting — at home, in the car, in the office, on the train, while using the computer, anywhere — bring significant health risks.

And alarmingly, these risks are not reduced by the amount of physical exercise we do.

UK physical activity and health expert Prof Stuart Biddle told a recent conference in Cairns that there was growing evidence that the more you sit, the greater the risk from cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity and premature death.

In fact it has been said that sitting for most of the day increases the risk of heart attack to about the same as smoking.

Prof Biddle says we should all decrease the amount of time we

spend sitting, and when we do sit we should break it up.

For even the most physically active people, long periods spent sitting can be detrimental.

“If you go for your 30-minute gym session, but then sit for the rest of the day, you are putting yourself at risk,” he says.

“We need to consciously alter our behaviour to break the sitting cycle. We can’t always control our environment, but we can take individual actions where our behaviour is concerned.”

Prof Biddle practises what he preaches — standing up to read papers on the top of a filing cabinet at work, using a laptop computer so he can stand to work, and he has a rule in his office that the first 15 minutes of meetings are conducted standing up.

Global studies have shown that we sit, on average, 7.7 hours a day, though some people sit up to 15 hours a day.

Local research at Melbourne’s Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute found overweight office workers, drivers and call centre staff who sit for long periods could improve their health with frequent activity breaks.

“When we sit, we have

muscle ‘disuse’ — our muscles are essentially ‘sleeping’. When we’re up and moving, we’re contracting muscles and it appears that these frequent contractions throughout the day are beneficial for helping to regulate the body’s metabolic processes,” Assoc Prof David Dunstan says.

Researchers found that the benefits of walking at a light intensity were almost identical to walking at moderate intensity, suggesting it was the act of standing up, moving and reducing sitting time rather than the intensity of the activity that make a difference.

“Just standing up regularly, walking to the printer, using the stairs not the elevator and standing while on the phone are likely to deliver a benefit.

“As recently as two decades ago, people were moving more frequently throughout the day in the workplace. Prior to email, people had to collect mail from a pigeon hole, or walk over to a desk for a chat. I think we’ve reached a crisis point where we need to step back and acknowledge that sitting for long periods is not what our bodies were designed for.”



## HOW YOU CAN MOVE MORE

- Stand during meetings
- **Go for a brisk walk during your lunch break**
- Park your car further away from your destination
- **Conduct meetings while walking outdoors**
- Take the stairs rather than the lift or take the long route to where you are walking
- **Stand at a high bench to eat your lunch**
- Stand up and move while talking on the phone
- **Get up and move at least once every hour – set a timer to remind you to stand up and stretch**
- Consider a height-adjustable desk that permits working in both a sitting and standing position
- **Limit TV viewing to two hours a day and get up to change the channels**

