Don’t just sit there!

We know sitting too much is bad, and most of us intuitively feel a little guilty after a long TV binge. But what exactly goes wrong in our bodies when we park ourselves for nearly eight hours per day, the average for a U.S. adult? Many things, say four experts, who detailed a chain of problems from head to toe.

**ORGAN DAMAGE**

Heart disease

Muscles burn less fat and blood flows more sluggishly during a long sit, allowing fatty acids to more easily clog the heart. Prolonged sitting has been linked to high blood pressures and elevated cholesterol, and people with the most sedentary time are more than twice as likely to have cardiovascular disease than those with the least.

Overproductive pancreas

The pancreas produces insulin, a hormone that carries glucose to cells for energy. But cells in idle muscles don’t respond as readily to insulin, so the pancreas produces more and more, which can lead to diabetes and other diseases. A 2011 study found a decline in insulin response after just one day of prolonged sitting.

Colon cancer

Studies have linked sitting to a greater risk for colon, breast and endometrial cancers. The reason is unclear, but one theory is that excess insulin encourages cell growth. Another is that regular movement boosts natural antioxidants that kill cell-damaging—and potentially cancer-causing—free radicals.

**MUSCLE DEGENERATION**

Mushy abs

When you stand, move or even sit up straight, abdominal muscles keep you upright. But when you slump in a chair, they go unused. Tight back muscles and wimpy abs form a posture-wrecking alliance that can exaggerate the spine’s natural arch, a condition called hyperlordosis, or swayback.

Limp glutes

Sitting requires your glutes to do absolutely nothing, and they get used to it. Soft glutes hurt your stability, your ability to push off and your ability to maintain a powerful stride.

**TROUBLE AT THE TOP**

Foggy brain

Moving muscles pump fresh blood and oxygen through the brain and trigger the release of all sorts of brain- and mood-enhancing chemicals. When we are sedentary for a long time, everything slows, including brain function.

**BAD BACK**

Inflexible spine

Spines that don’t move become inflexible and susceptible to damage in mundane activities, such as when you reach for a coffee cup or bend to tie a shoe. When we move around, soft disks between vertebrae expand and contract like sponges, soaking up fresh blood and nutrients. When we sit for a long time, disks are squashed unevenly and lose sponginess. Collagenhardens around supporting tendons and ligaments.

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**LEG DISORDERS**

Poor circulation in legs

Sitting for long periods of time slows blood circulation, which causes fluid to pool in the legs. Problems range from swollen ankles and varicose veins to dangerous blood clots called deep vein thrombosis (DVT).

Soft bones

Weight-bearing activities such as walking and running stimulate hip and lower-body bones to grow thicker, denser and stronger. Scientists partially attribute the recent surge in cases of osteoporosis to lack of activity.

So what can we do? The experts recommend . . .

**THE RIGHT WAY TO SIT**

If you have to sit often, try to do it correctly. As Mom always said, “Sit up straight.”

**The experts**

Scientists interviewed for this report:

**James A. Levine**, inventor of the treadmill desk and director of Glimmer Solutions at Mayo Clinic and Arizona State University.

**Charles E. Matthews**, National Cancer Institute investigator and author of several studies on sedentary behavior.

**Jay Dicharry**, director of the NHP Biomechanics Lab in Bend, Ore., and author of “Running for the Forrest.”

**Tal Amason**, biomechanist at Barry University’s Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences.


Don’t just sit there!...