

## Sedentary lifestyle doesn't sit well

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by Amanda Cuda

Linda Gottlieb's office is filled with reasons not to sit.

There's the standing desk, with a raised platform for her laptop, which allows her to take care of business while on her feet. Next to her desk, there's an exercise ball she can balance on, allowing her to get off her feet and engage her core muscles at the same time.

And when she absolutely must sit at her desk in a traditional chair, she often does desk exercises; including dancing along to a "chair salsa" video she can cue up on her computer at a moment's notice.



**Linda T Gottlieb, MA, CPT, CET**

Gottlieb, a Milford-based fitness coach, has basically booby-trapped her life to cut down on sedentary behavior. She has been an anti-sitting crusader for years, as she's convinced spending too much time lounging around carries serious health risks.

"There's a couple of sayings out there now -- 'Sitting is the new smoking,' and 'Sitting may kill you,'" Gottlieb said. "I believe both to be true."

Indeed, scientific evidence seems to support the idea that sedentary behavior is bad news. A study published last month in the [Annals of Internal Medicine](#) showed a rise in sedentary activity was linked to an increase risk of several illnesses, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes and various types of cancer. Even more disturbing, the research showed that, while exercise helped reduce the risks of sitting, it didn't erase them.

### Sitting risks

Though the issue has been on the minds of health and medical experts for years, findings such as those in the [Annals of Internal Medicine](#) study offer even more reasons to think twice before spending too much time on that sofa or chair. Researchers examined 47 studies on sedentary behavior and found long periods of sitting increased the risk of heart disease by 14 percent, cancer by 13 percent and diabetes by 91 percent.

The results made sense to many in the health field, including [Rebecca A. Petersen](#), athletic trainer and motion analysis program coordinator at [Stamford Hospital's Orthopedic and Spine Institute](#). "Certainly, a lack of physical activity can lead to a lot of chronic health problems," she said.

In her field, one of her biggest concerns is the effect prolonged sitting can have on the back and spine. "Your vertebrae and the discs in your spine -- they like to have movement," Petersen said. Sitting for long periods of time doesn't allow that, which can lead to back pain, neck strain and other issues.

A lack of movement can also slow the body's internal processes, which can be disastrous, said Dr. [Peter Cimino](#), an internist with [Fairfield Medical Group](#) in Fairfield. "You burn less fat, and the blood flows more sluggishly when you're sitting," he said.

A lot of the health risks associated with sitting stem from a "use-it-or-lose-it" philosophy, Cimino said. "With a lack of activity, basic systems in the body can erode away," Cimino said. "Our bodies are very economical. We don't keep systems we don't use."

Certified Personal Trainer Linda Gottlieb stands at her desk in her home office in Milford, Conn. on Wednesday Feb. 4, 2015. New research has shown that people who sit for prolonged periods of time are at higher risk for a variety of illnesses, including heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Gottlieb stresses that there are plenty of ways to get exercise in even when sitting in an office chair. Photo: Christian Abraham

**Dana White**, assistant professor of sports medicine and athletic training at **Quinnipiac University**, agreed. "If you work eight to nine hours a day, and you're sitting for most of it, your metabolic rate slows down," she said.

Even regular exercise can't make the negative effects of sitting disappear. The study showed the risk of premature death was only 30 percent lower among those who mixed high levels of physical activity with sedentary behavior.

That finding is unsettling, **Cimino** said, given the conventional wisdom has long been that "sedentary" people and "active" people are two different groups. "You could be a person who does 30 minutes of moderate activity a day, but if you have a job where you sit at a desk all day," you could still be at risk, he said.

One expert said too much time spent sitting could actually make it more difficult for people to exercise regularly. Sitting for long periods can tighten the hip flexors, a group of muscles that control some movements of the waist and knees, said **Caitlin Drap**, senior triathlon coach at **Chelsea Piers Connecticut** in Stamford.

"The more you shorten the hip flexors, the harder it is to actually move," she said. Exercises such as walking and running become particularly difficult and people can even injure themselves due to these shortened muscles.

## Making it better

But doctors and fitness gurus said there are easy ways to cut your tushie time without changing careers or forgoing that long-awaited TV binge.

**Gottlieb** recommends finding sneaky ways to move more throughout the day, such as using a rest room on a different floor, or parking as far away from the office as possible. And stop fighting the urge to bounce the knees or tap the feet during the workday, she said. "Fidget -- that counts as moving," **Gottlieb** said.

There's also office equipment that can reduce sitting or make it more active, such as a treadmill desk, or simply a homemade raised desk that requires the user to stand while working.

Many fitness experts also recommended exercise balls, also known as yoga balls -- big, inflatable objects that can be used in place of chair. Because the balls are unstable, the user has to balance on them and use muscles they wouldn't use when sitting on a regular chair.

And, for those who work at home, or in a laid-back office environment, **Gottlieb** and **Drap** recommend some quick exercises that can be done at or near the desk to keep muscles active. **Gottlieb** said simply standing up and sitting down -- without using the arms of one's desk chair for balance -- can keep the muscles limber. **Drap**, meanwhile, suggested taking breaks every 30 minutes or so to lie face down on the floor and push the trunk of the body up. Hold for a few seconds and repeat several times.

Not only do taking these fitness breaks help keep the body active, **Gottlieb** said, they help people realize just how much time they spend sitting.

"The important thing is to be aware of how much you're sitting and to be aware that sitting isn't really good for you," she said.

### Stand up for health

Tips for reducing sedentary time, from Dr. David Alter, senior scientist at the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute and author of a study on the risk of sedentary behavior, recently published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

- + At work, stand up or move around for one to three minutes every half hour.
- + Stand or exercise while watching TV commercials.
- + Monitor your sitting times; set achievable goals to reduce that time by a little each week.
- + Aim for two to three fewer sedentary hours in a 12-hour day.

+ **Video:** To learn about ways to stand up while at work, go to <http://bit.ly/1CtKwXH>

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