

Kill Your Desk Chair & Arise

Sitting all day takes years off your life; workers are turning to standing & treadmill desks

DRAKE BENNETT

Arise, office workers of the world! You have nothing to lose but your chairs. And even if they are of supple executive leather or high-tech Aeron mesh, those chairs are lethal. A raft of recent medical research has shown that the more time a person spends sitting every day, the more likely he or she is to suffer from heart disease, diabetes, obesity, cancer, and, worst of all, an early death. One recent study, from the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, followed 17,000 Canadians over 12 years and found that those who sat for most of the day were 54% more likely to die of heart attacks than those who didn't. The findings have spawned a new diagnosis: "sitting disease." And strikingly, even regular exercise and a healthy diet don't protect you—sitting in a chair for eight hours after going to the gym and munching on tempeh is still sitting.

For those in non-sedentary lines of work, these findings are probably validating. But most Americans have the sort of jobs where they sit at desks while day by day their arteries harden and their bellies soften. The good news is that we don't have to revert to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to combat this silent assassin. Many of the problems can be solved, researchers say, simply by getting up: standing and stretching once an hour or walking down the hall to talk to someone rather than sending an e-mail. A growing number of office workers, though, are opting for something more radical—they're going seatless. Their saviour is the standing desk.

Standing desks aren't new. Ernest Hemingway used one; so did Vladimir Nabokov, Winston Churchill, and Henry Clay. Thomas Jefferson designed his own. Standing-desk proponents claim Leonardo da Vinci as one of theirs, as well as Michelangelo, at least when he wasn't on his back painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling. As Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld spent his days dashing off his infamous "snowflake" memos from a stand-up desk. Ever the standing evangelist, he questioned limits on how long Guantanamo interrogators could keep detainees on their feet in a "stress position." "I stand for 8-10 hours a day," he wrote at the bottom of one memo. Today, though, the standing desk is going mainstream, especially in the tech world, with its office perks and geekish penchant for workspace optimisation. Standing desks have been spotted at Google, Facebook, Twitter, and AOL.

Like the proponents of macrobiotics and barefoot running, today's antisitting crusaders argue that our modern lifestyle—with its roughage-free processed foods, foam-cushioned shoes, Barcaloungers, and swivel chairs—has, by cossetting the body, actually caused it to break down. When we sit our muscles atrophy, our back crimps, and our metabolism slows. Yet if sitting is deadly, standing all day can also be hard on the body. It puts more strain on the heart and can increase the likelihood of atherosclerosis and varicose veins. "You've got to remember, 100 years ago, most work was done with people standing up, and that's why we tried to sit people down, because there are a number of problems," says Alan Hedge, a design and ergonomics professor at Cornell University.

A few companies have gone one step further: They've installed desks with treadmills, allowing some of their employees to work while walking in place (slowly, at speeds less than two miles per hour). Even at that pace, treadmill desks leave their sitting and standing brethren in the dust healthwise, their champions claim.

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Will the real desk jobbers please stand up