

# Stand up for wellness

## Sitting can lead to a variety of health risks

If you work in an office environment, think about your typical workday. By 8:00 a.m., you are sitting at your desk, hammering out a report or responding to emails. Around midmorning, you and your team sit around a big conference table for a meeting. At lunch, you sit and eat at your desk. The afternoon brings more meetings, emails, and reports to write.

After work, you may decide to head to the gym or go for a run. However, by that time, you probably have spent eight-plus hours of your day sitting in a chair, and you may not have even realized it.

A growing body of research indicates sitting for long periods of time increases rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and other diseases that can lead to premature death. More recent studies suggest that prolonged sitting even has detrimental effects on people who exercise regularly.

“While exercise is beneficial, the research suggests that time spent in vigorous exercise may not be enough to counteract prolonged periods of sitting,” said Deb Fell-Carlson, SAIF policyholder safety and wellness adviser. “We have to find ways to move more throughout the day.”

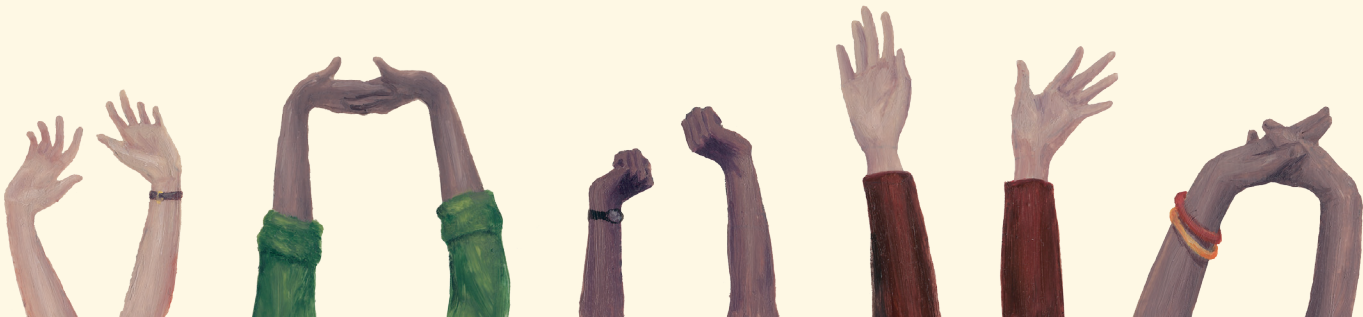
A study by the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, La., found that employees use less energy at work today than they did 50 years ago. On-the-job energy expenditure has decreased by more than 100 calories per day since the 1960s. That may not seem like a lot, but 100 calories adds up to a lot of weight over time.

“This reduction in occupational energy expenditure,” the study said, “accounts for a large portion of observed increase in mean U.S. weight over the last five decades.” (In other words, too much sitting could be a big reason why we’re gaining weight.)

### From work to home

Many of the same technological advances and cultural shifts that have changed the way we work have also had an impact on our home life. For example, in 2007, Nielsen reported that TV watching in American households had reached an all-time high. The average household reported watching eight hours per day, an increase of one hour per day from the preceding decade.

Why should employers be concerned how much sitting we do at home? Although there hasn’t been a definitive >>





➤➤ study linking occupational sitting to disease, there has been research on leisure-time sitting. An American Cancer Society study suggests an association between sitting and rates of cardiovascular disease in both men and women, as well as increased cancer deaths among women only. This study, which suggests an association but not cause and effect, did have controls in place for other health factors such as smoking, obesity, and physical activity.

### Alternatives to sitting

All over the U.S. and Oregon, companies like the Eugene Water and Electric Board (EWEB) have begun to address the hazards of prolonged sitting by implementing alternative workstations. Standing and sit-stand workstations are becoming more prevalent, and many more employers are investing in adjustable workstations as they upgrade office furniture.

When EWEB had the opportunity to purchase furniture for a new location in 2010, the company opted to provide sit-stand workstations as the standard for employees at that location. Today, 95 percent of employees at the company's Roosevelt Operation Center have a sit-stand workstation.

"There are tremendous health and productivity benefits to it," said Mark Maguire, EWEB safety coordinator. "It allows individuals to have some control over their work environment."

In combination with other companywide ergonomics interventions, the adjustable workstations have helped EWEB virtually eliminate ergonomics-related injuries

among office employees. They also help employees retain focus throughout the day.

"It gives folks tools so they don't feel stuck in one position," said Maguire.

Maguire said some employees move between sitting and standing several times per day. Others only stand on occasion, such as when they are experiencing discomfort from sitting.

Safety and ergonomics experts prefer standing to alternative modes of sitting, such as the use of exercise balls and exercise ball chairs. There have been reports of serious ball chair accidents and injuries, and there is little evidence to suggest the potential benefits of these chairs outweigh the risks.

### Small steps, big rewards

If you and your employees are primarily used to sitting at work, it may take time, resources, and effort to sit less and move more. The task may seem daunting, but the investment in wellness will likely pay off in decreased health costs, fewer injuries, and increased productivity. (For tips to get started, see the Bulletin Board on page 31.)

"Employers have the power to create a culture where physical activity is encouraged and a work environment where it is safe and easy to do," said Fell-Carlson. "We encourage employers to look at standing and walking alternatives—anything that gets workers out of their chairs."