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ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

HR'S KEY ROLE



IS SITTING THE NEW SMOKING?

MOST OF US ARE SUSCEPTIBLE TO “SITTING DISEASE.” HERE’S WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT.

By Heather Hudson



According to Dr. David Harper, Canadians’ sedentary behaviour could put our health at risk as much as smoking cigarettes.

The Mississauga, Ont.-based chiropractic sports and occupational health and corporate wellness specialist has a strong warning for office workers, in particular.

“Sitting disease is the most significant iconic modifiable risk factor for all chronic non-communicable disease across all ethnicities and age demographics in Canada,” he said. “There’s literature to suggest that if you sit for more than three hours a day, you increase the risk of cardiovascular disease and early death.”

WHAT IS SITTING DISEASE?

Mayo Clinic endocrinologist Dr. James Levine may have been among the first in the medical community to name the condition that is one of the common denominators of myriad chronic, non-communicable diseases, including:

- Obesity
- Type 2 diabetes
- Cardiovascular disease
- Some forms of cancer
- Back and neck pain
- Blood clots
- Digestive problems

“Research suggests that when we spend long periods of time in one position, there are changes even at a cellular level,” said Harper.

While there is no official medical consensus on what constitutes a “limit” for how many hours a day puts you in the range of the risk of sitting disease, it’s safe to say that office workers who spend the majority of their workday in a chair may be putting themselves at risk.

And here’s the kicker: a recent study out of England’s University of Leicester suggests that active, physically fit people who sit for several hours a day are at an equal level of risk as sedentary people



“EVERYONE NEEDS TO GET UP TO DO INCIDENTAL WALKING ... ORGANIZE YOUR DAY TO MAKE SURE YOU’RE MOVING REGULARLY.”

— GIOVANNA BONIFACE, MANAGING DIRECTOR, CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS, BC CHAPTER

ing run won’t decrease your risk of disease if you spend the bulk of the day and evening in a chair.

“One study indicated that if most people would spend less than three hours per day sitting, it would add two years to the average life expectancy,” said Harper.

CAN YOU REDUCE THE EFFECTS OF SITTING DISEASE?

The research is certainly disquieting, but there are strategies to help decrease the health risks associated with doing your job in a chair every day.

“The standard answer is that you have to move more,” said Harper. “But it’s more than just getting up and sitting down again.”

He says it’s actually the loss of our experience with gravity due to being sedentary that impacts our health the most. He treats some patients with “whole body vibration” in his office – a technique used by the Russian space program to help slow down and reverse aging – which essentially changes a person’s gravitational force for a few moments at a time.

To achieve a similar effect, jumping might be the answer.

“Getting up and hopping up and down changes the body position but also the gravitational experience the body has in the chair. It’s a simple strategy that works well.”

Giovanna Boniface, managing director of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, BC chapter, agrees that regular movement is critical for people who sit for long periods

of time. She suggests using time management to make sure those “movement breaks” happen at work.

“Everyone needs to get up to do incidental walking, whether it’s to go to the photocopier, the washroom or to get coffee,” she said. “I recommend looking at all the different things you do in a day and staggering those activities to ensure you’re getting up a couple of times an hour. Organize your day to make sure you’re moving regularly.”

If you lose track of time by becoming engrossed in your work, Boniface suggests setting a timer on your computer to remind yourself to get up, move and stretch.

“For some of our patients we have to install a break timer on their computer that has a stretch built in. Each break stretches a different part of the body so that over the course of the day, they’ve gotten several stretches.”

Standing workstations are recent additions to some workplaces, but Boniface and Harper agree that standing in one position for a long period of time is equivalent to sitting.

“It’s really about the change in what happens when you walk, jump up and down, shake out your legs, stretch and move the body around,” said Harper.

HOW CAN HR HELP?

Creating a culture that values health and wellness is key to fostering a healthy workforce. In fact, the World Health Organization advises that the workplace is the ideal place to educate people about the impact of sedentary lifestyles.



You’re Invited

Because sitting is something that we will never be able to avoid, dealing with the consequences of chronic sedentary behaviour must be proactive. The workplace – where many of us sit for hours on end – is the place to begin this conversation.

The first annual Move to Live® Corporate Wellness Challenge is being scheduled for early September 2014. The corporate community in the Toronto area will have the opportunity to come together to support and learn more about workplace wellness in a fun, friendly environment. The first event will be an evening of five or 10-pin bowling; bowling is a social and simple active sport that enables all to participate, regardless of athletic ability or skill level. There is no individual cost to participate and food will be provided. Lanes are available for corporate sponsorship, and bowler pledges will support a local charity whose focus is one affected by chronic sedentary behaviour, yet to be confirmed.

For more information, call 905-629-0688 or email Dr. Dave Harper at drdave@mosaiclifecare.com.



“THERE’S LITERATURE TO SUGGEST THAT IF YOU SIT FOR MORE THAN THREE HOURS A DAY, YOU INCREASE THE RISK OF CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE AND EARLY DEATH.”

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SPORTS AND OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND
CORPORATE WELLNESS SPECIALIST

“We protect employees from obvious harmful environments, such as chemicals, lifting or working from heights. Now we must confront what science is clearly warning us about the epidemic of sitting disease,” said Harper.

Strategies include education and awareness that goes beyond disease avoidance and enters into prevention.

“It’s not so much about changing the work station as it is about each employee becoming responsible for their own personal health and safety. What is needed is the education, the activation and the motivation in a supportive and collaborative team environment,” said Harper.

Harper suggests considering using measurement tools such as the Creating Wellness Assessment System to get personal and corporate feedback to help identify risks so each employee may address them with the support of the workplace.

Boniface recommends encouraging employees to take short, regular breaks to stretch and move and making break reminder software (with or without suggested stretches) available.

“Fostering health and wellness in the workplace goes a long way,” she said. “Health and wellness accounts, regular lunchtime walks and healthy lunches together are the kinds of things that demonstrate that the workplace values their employees’ well-being.”

Other strategies include holding “walking meetings” instead of piling into a conference room, standing or walking while talking on the phone and considering alternate commuting options, such as cycling or walking.

Harper is discouraged by The Heart and Stroke Foundation’s warning that without immediate action, the average baby boomer in Canada will spend the last 10 years of his life living with sickness and disease. As a result, he works to provide computer-based wellness assessment systems that he hopes will lengthen lives of people through activity.

“Early death does not have to be your fate. We can realize a better health outcome if we heed this warning and choose a different path.” ■



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