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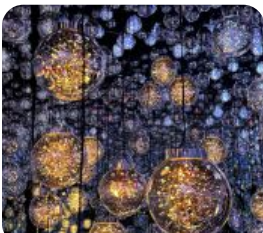
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That comfortable desk job? It's killing you...

Sitting is rapidly becoming the new smoking

By Oliver Arlow

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Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in 2023 made its first revision to the physical activity standards it initially drew up in 2013 to promote public health, adding “sedentary behavior” to the list of dangers to the nation's well-being.

Under the new guidelines, people are told to “avoid too much time in a sedentary position” and to regularly get up and move around. This is in a nation in which millions of people are employed in office environments, with all the associated risks to their health.

The government's recommendations are built on many years of research, notably in Australia, and scientific evidence that too much sitting is associated with a range of medical complaints, ranging from an increased risk of type 2 diabetes to heart disease and some types of cancer. There are also implications for bowel functions and sitting still for hours on end can also weaken bones.

Sitting behind a desk for hours on end has also been linked to a deterioration in mental health, leading to depression and anxiety.

A study published in 2012 the Archives of Internal Medicine followed 220,497 people aged 45 or older in Australia over three years and determined that anyone who spent 11 hours a day seated was fully 40 percent more likely to die during the course of the study than those who spent less than four hours a day sitting down.

The study was able to demonstrate that the degree of risk was the same regardless of whether people were of normal weight or overweight or had pre-existing medical conditions.

The reasons for the impact of insufficient exercise were explained by Koichiro Oka, a professor of health and behavioral sciences at Waseda University, in an interview published in October 2023 in the Mainichi Shimbun.

Oka said that the primary reason why prolonged sitting is so bad for our health is that the leg muscles – the largest in the body – are inactive. This slows the metabolism and reduces blood flow which, in turn, increases levels of blood sugar and fat, both significant contributors to a number of illnesses. A lack of activity also impacts blood pressure.

“Sitting is not all that bad,” Oka said. “The point is to ‘break,’ We need to interrupt our sitting frequently, as prolonged sitting produces very little muscle contraction in the limbs.”

The professor recommended standing up and moving about for about three minutes every 30 minutes. He suggested that the movement can be something as simple as a squat or two or a standing heel lift. Climb a flight of stairs or two. And for anyone who does exercise, the key is frequency rather than intensity, Oka added.

The evidence indicates that regular exercise is good for the mind as well as the body, with the 2023 report by the Japan Sports Agency showing that middle-aged and older people who exercise at least three times a week for a minimum of an hour feel a higher “sense of achievement” than those that do not work out.



Oliver Arlow

Oliver Arlow is a freelance writer who is originally from the UK and has lived in Japan for more than a decade.

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