

Sitting less for adults

The arrival of the 'electronic age' has fundamentally changed how much time we spend sitting (also called being 'sedentary') at home, during travel and at work. This change has been directly linked to an increase in health problems, such as poor nutrition, obesity and insulin resistance, which can lead to diabetes. These health problems also increase your risk of developing coronary heart disease.

There are many ways in which adults can sit for long periods throughout the day. A typical day might include sitting:

- to eat breakfast
- to drive to work
- at your desk at work
- to drive home
- to eat dinner
- during the evening to do things such as watch television, use a computer and socialise.

It's very easy to sit too much – adults spend more than half of their waking hours sitting.^{1–3} Therefore, to reduce your risk of health problems, it's important to be aware of how much you sit and try to move more throughout the day.

Why is sitting less better for your health?

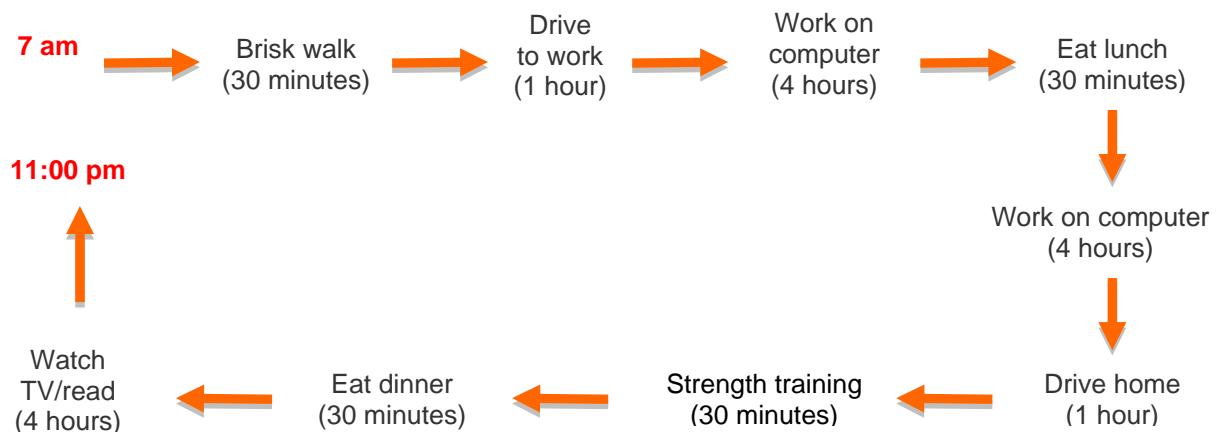
Adults who sit less throughout the day have a lower risk of early death – particularly from cardiovascular disease (CVD).^{4,5}

Most research so far has been on how watching television affects health, because watching television is the most common leisure activity among adults. Adults who watch less than two hours of television a day are less likely to have type 2 diabetes or be obese, and have a lower risk of developing CVD.⁶ The reverse is also true – the more time an adult spends watching television, the higher their risk of health problems.

Adults who do regular planned exercise, such as going to the gym or running, can still sit for long periods of time every day. Figure 1 (see page two) shows how easy it is for an adult to spend a large amount of time sitting during a typical working day. In this example, the adult gets 60 minutes of physical activity that day through a brisk walk in the morning and strength training in the evening. However, they also spend 15 hours (over 90% of total waking hours) sitting.

If an adult meets the Australian Government's physical activity recommendations of 30 minutes or more moderate-intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week, they are classified as 'physically active'. However, adults may increase their health benefits if they also sit less during the day. In fact, new evidence suggests that, no matter what your total sitting time is, regular interruptions from sitting (even as little as standing up) may help to reduce your risk factors for developing coronary heart disease and diabetes.^{2,7}

Figure 1. Example of an adult's total sitting time during one day (15 hours)



What is recommended?

We recommend that adults aim to reduce the total amount of time they sit during the day (their 'overall sitting time'). Studies support the broad recommendation to create more opportunities to limit sitting time and to avoid prolonged periods of sitting.⁶

While there are no public health guidelines on how long adults should sit, a good guide is for adults to follow the Australian Government's physical activity recommendations for five to 18 year olds. Because watching television, using a computer and playing electronic games usually involve sitting for long periods of time, these recommendations suggest limiting time spent doing these things to less than two hours a day. In fact, studies have shown that adults who watch less than two hours of television a day have a lower risk of early death than adults who watch more than this.⁸⁻¹⁰

As sitting is a large part of many people's work day, we recommend that workplaces implement strategies to reduce the amount of time their employees spend sitting. The benefits of encouraging employees to sit less include lower rates of obesity and chronic disease, and in turn, reduced absenteeism and increased staff participation.^{11,12}

How can I reduce my sitting time?

There are many simple changes you can make to reduce your sitting time and move more. On the next page is a list of examples you can try at home, in transit and at work.

Tips to reduce your sitting time

At home	At work	While travelling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get off the couch and walk around the house during commercial breaks. • Do household chores, such as folding clothes, washing dishes or ironing, while watching television. • Stand to read the morning newspaper. • Wash your car by hand rather than using a drive-through car wash. • Move around the house when checking text messages and email on your mobile phone. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stand and take a break from your computer every 30 minutes. • Take breaks in sitting time in long meetings. • Stand to greet a visitor to your workspace. • Use the stairs. • Stand during phone calls. • Walk to your colleagues' desk instead of phoning or emailing. • Drink more water – going to the water cooler and toilet will break up sitting time. • Move your bin away from your desk so you have to get up to put something in it. • Use a height-adjustable desk so you can work standing or sitting. • Have standing or walking meetings. • Use headsets or the speaker phone during teleconferences so you can stand. • Eat your lunch away from your desk. • Stand at the back of the room during presentations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave your car at home and take public transport so you walk to and from stops/stations. • Walk or cycle at least part way to your destination. • Park your car further away from your destination and walk the rest of the way. • Plan regular breaks during long car trips. • On public transport, stand and offer your seat to a person who really needs it. • Get on/off public transport one stop/station earlier.

Want to know more?

For more information on how to sit less and move more, call our Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87 (for the cost of a local call) or email health@heartfoundation.org.au.

The Heart Foundation would like to thank Professor David Dunstan, Professor Wendy Brown and Dr Genevieve Healy, who helped to prepare this information sheet.

References

1. Healy GN, et al. Objectively measured light-intensity physical activity is independently associated with 2-h plasma glucose. *Diabetes Care* 2007; 30(6): 1384-9.
2. Healy GN, et al. Sedentary time and cardio-metabolic biomarkers in US adults: NHANES 2003-06. *European Heart Journal* 2011; 32(5) 590-97.
3. Matthews CE, et al. Amount of time spent in sedentary behaviors in the United States, 2003-2004. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 2008; 167(7): 875-81.
4. Katzmarzyk PT, et al. Sitting time and mortality from all causes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. *Medicine and science in sports and exercise* 2009; 41(5): 998-1005.
5. Patel AV, et al. Leisure time spent sitting in relation to total mortality in a prospective cohort of US adults. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 2010; 172(4): 419-29.
6. Owen N, et al. Too much sitting: the population health science of sedentary behavior. *Exerc Sport Sci Rev* 2010; 38(3): 105-13.
7. Healy GN, et al. Breaks in sedentary time: beneficial associations with metabolic risk. *Diabetes Care* 2008; 31(4): 661-6.
8. Dunstan DW, et al. Television viewing time and mortality: the Australian Diabetes, Obesity and Lifestyle Study (AusDiab). *Circulation* 2010; 121(3): 384-91.
9. Stamatakis E, Hamer M, Dunstan DW. Screen-based entertainment time, all-cause mortality, and cardiovascular events population-based study with ongoing mortality and hospital events follow-up. *J American College of Cardiology* 2011; 57(3): 292-9.
10. Wijndaele K, et al. Increased cardiometabolic risk is associated with increased TV viewing time. *Medicine and science in sports and exercise* 2010; 42(8): 1511-8.
11. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Chronic disease and participation in work. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009.
12. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Risk factors and participation in work. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010.

© 2011 National Heart Foundation of Australia ABN 98 008 419 761

INF-071-C

Terms of use: This material has been developed for general information and educational purposes only. It does not constitute medical advice. Please consult your healthcare provider if you have, or suspect you have, a health problem. The health information provided has been developed by the Heart Foundation and is based on independent research and the available scientific evidence at the time of writing. The information is obtained and developed from a variety of sources including but not limited to collaborations with third parties and information provided by third parties under licence. It is not an endorsement of any organisation, product or service. While care has been taken in preparing the content of this material, the National Heart Foundation of Australia and its employees cannot accept any liability, including for any loss or damage, resulting from the reliance on the content, or for its accuracy, currency and completeness. This material may be found in third parties' programs or materials (including but not limited to show bags or advertising kits). This does not imply an endorsement or recommendation by the National Heart Foundation of Australia for such third parties' organisations, products or services, including these parties' materials or information. Any use of National Heart Foundation of Australia material by another person or organisation is done so at the user's own risk.