

POEL9G Working with sit-stand desks



A study commissioned by Public Health England provides recommendations to sedentary workers on reducing the risks of long-term ailments.

There is growing evidence from a number of different sources that prolonged occupational sitting has negative effects on health. Recent studies appear to show a clear correlation between sedentary workers who spend most of their work and leisure time in a sitting position, and a two-fold increase in diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers, compared with those who intersperse their sitting with standing or activity.

A [2012 study](#) by the University of Leicester found that the average adult nowadays spends 50-70% of their time sitting, and that those who sit for long periods have a two-fold increase in the risk of diabetes and heart disease. Worryingly, this is regardless of the amount of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity undertaken, which suggests that *even if an individual undertakes physical activity at other times*, their health may still be compromised if they sit for long periods during the day. This has big implications for homes and for offices, and we can't simply address the issue by going to the gym.

Dr Emma Wilmot at the Leicester Diabetes Centre said, "Our study shows that the most consistent associations were between **sitting** and **diabetes**. This is an important message because people with risk factors for diabetes may be able to reduce their future risk of diabetes by limiting the time spent sitting." This was echoed by Professor Melanie Davies, Professor of Diabetes Medicine at the University of Leicester. "This [study] has a very important message for the public but also for health care professionals – namely that *being sedentary is common and dangerous for our long-term health*, particularly for diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and *that this link appears to be over and above other lifestyle factors such as our diet and physical activity*."

A 2015 report commissioned by [Public Health England](#) also aims to highlight the health risks of sedentary lifestyles. "This research supports the Chief Medical Officer's recommendations to minimise how much we sit still," says Dr Ann Hopkins, deputy Director for Health and Wellbeing at Public Health England. "Being active is good for your physical and mental health. Simple behaviour changes to break up long periods of sitting can make a huge difference."

The Public Health England report's recommendations are designed to offer guidance to employees and employers on how to reduce the potential risks of long periods of sitting at work. These include suggestions that workers aim for between two hours' and four hours' of standing or light walking/activity during a full working day. These breaks from sitting can be achieved by standing-based work, by the use of sit-stand desks where they are available, or by taking short active breaks.



Postural guidance for sit-stand desks, where available

- Stand in an upright position (not slouched) with feet apart, one foot slightly in front of the other and knees slightly bent (not 'locked' back).
- Keep shoulders relaxed and elbows level with the desk surface.
- Avoid twisting and reaching away from you
- You may need to raise the monitor slightly. Eyes should be level with the top line of the script for 'touch-typists' and slightly lower for other users.
- Document holders should be at the same height and angle as the screen.
- Some people prefer to change their standing position by placing one foot on a small block for a few minutes and then alternating with the other foot.
- Alternate sitting with standing.
- You should spend 5-6 minutes standing for every 30 minutes spent sitting.

But it's not all about equipment – compliance plays a key part. Even without the aid of a sit-stand desk, we can be individually responsible for protecting our long-term health, provided we are willing to make a number of small, key changes. Professor Stuart Biddle of Loughborough University, a co-investigator on the Leicester study, said, "There are many ways we can reduce our sitting time – such as breaking up long periods at the computer at work by placing our laptop on a filing cabinet. We can have standing meetings, we can walk during the lunch break, and we can look to reduce TV viewing in the evenings by seeking out less sedentary behaviours."

It is essential to take regular breaks and to make small adjustments to work routines, and to realise that this is as true for our home lifestyles as it is for our office-based habits.

Tips to incorporate into your daily routine, regardless of whether there is a sit-stand desk available

- Learn how to use the sit-stand desk, if one is available, learn when to make posture changes and understand what good posture feels like (both sitting and standing).
- Raise the desk up too high at the end of the day. It makes life easier for cleaners and forces you to reposition it correctly in the morning.
- Raise the desk when colleagues approach and have your conversation standing up.
- Stand for telephone conversations, especially those when you need to be assertive.
- Stand to sort papers and files.

- Install 'poseur tables' for short standing meetings (gas-life height-adjustable versions are available).
- Have walking meetings.
- Park as far away from the building as possible.
- Wear a pedometer and track your steps. Compete with yourself to improve your average!
- Assemble a team to take part in the Global Corporate Challenge.
- Use the stairs, not the lift (some organisations slow the lifts down to encourage stair use).
- In hot desking areas, install a pair of sit-stand desks at the end of each set of standard desks. This will work very well provided good policies and procedures are in place (and that the hot desking facilities are properly implemented and managed). Again, this is about compliance and taking individual responsibility for using facilities that will support your long-term wellbeing.

Additional resources

[Link to the study by the University of Leicester: Associations of objectively measured sedentary behaviour and physical activity with markers of cardiometabolic health](#)

[Link to the Public Health England-commissioned report: The Sedentary Office](#)

[NHS Choices: Sitting/sedentary behaviour bad for your health](#)

[Implementing sit-stand desks – a strategic approach](#)

[Posture for sit-stand desks](#)

[Eight exercises for sedentary workers](#)

[Ergonomic Evaluation of Electrically Adjustable Table in VDU Work \(Choi, D-S\)](#)

[Effects of an Electric Height-Adjustable Work surface on Self-Assessed Musculoskeletal Discomfort and Productivity in Computer Workers \(Hedge, A; 2004\)](#)