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When you sit too long

a minimum of 20 minutes of physical activity every day can help combat the harmful effects of a sedentary lifestyle.

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WORKING from home (WFH) has many advantages for employees, but it's not without consequences for health.



Indeed, WFH is doing nothing to improve sedentary lifestyles, which have become a public health priority in many countries.

However, a new study reveals that simple, accessible actions could limit the effects of prolonged sitting, starting with some 20 minutes of physical activity a day.

Global health recommendations are clear: adults aged 18 to 64 should be doing at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week, as well as muscle-strengthening activities a minimum of twice a week.

At least, that's the amount recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) for adults to maintain "good health".

At the same time, the international health authority reports that a third of women and a quarter of men worldwide do not devote enough time to this type of activity, which is nevertheless essential for limiting the effects of sedentary lifestyles.

And this is becoming increasingly challenging with the rise in remote working.

Based on the observation that an adult spends an average of nine to 10 hours a day in a seated position – at least in developed countries – a team of researchers led by scientists at UIT The Arctic University of Norway set out to determine whether physical activity could reduce the risk of death linked to prolonged sitting.

And above all, they sought to establish a minimum duration of physical activity necessary to reverse the trend.

To do this, they analysed data from 11,989 individuals aged at least 50, equipped with activity sensors and drawn from four surveys – two carried out in Norway, one in Sweden and one in the United States, between 2003 and 2019.

The data was then linked with death registries.

Reversing the harm

Published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, the study estimates that 5,943 participants spent less than 10.5 hours sitting daily, compared to 6,042 who spent more time sitting.

The research reports that 805 participants died, of whom 357 spent less than 10.5 hours sitting each day, and 448 spent more than 10.5 hours sitting.

This was observed over an average monitoring period of five years.

This data enabled the researchers to conclude that prolonged sitting, i.e. for more than 12 hours, is associated with a 38% increased risk of death, compared to a daily sitting time of eight hours.

But not for all participants, since moderate-to-vigorous physical activity of at least 22 minutes daily appeared to help reverse this trend.

It seems that around 20 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day could be enough to counterbalance the harmful effects of a sedentary lifestyle.

However, this is a minimum amount of time, as the researchers point out that the longer the duration, the lower the risk of death.

“For example, an extra 10 minutes a day was associated with a 15% lower risk of death in those spending fewer than 10.5 sedentary hours, and a 35% lower risk among those spending more than 10.5 sedentary hours, every day,” reads the study’s accompanying press release.

Note that the duration of physical activity estimated by the Norwegian researchers corresponds to the average duration recommended by the WHO.

Every step counts

This is an observational study that does not establish a direct link between physical activity and a reduced risk of death in sedentary people, especially as certain factors, such as diet and general health, were not taken into account.

Still, this does not prevent the researchers from concluding that: “small amounts of MVPA [moderate to vigorous physical activity] may be an effective strategy to ameliorate the mortality [death] risk from high sedentary time, where accumulating more than 22 minutes of MVPA eliminates the risk of high sedentary time”.

Contrary to popular belief, you don’t have to run a marathon or engage in high-intensity exercise to combat the potential effects of a sedentary lifestyle.

According to the WHO, physical activity is defined as “any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure.

“Physical activity refers to all movement, including during leisure time, for transport to get to and from places, or as part of a person’s work.”

This can involve walking, cycling, sports, active recreation and play, the global authority points out.

Simple actions to adopt on a daily basis include taking the stairs, rather than the elevator; walking or cycling, rather than taking the car for short journeys; or getting off the subway, bus or streetcar one station early to increase your amount of daily physical activity.