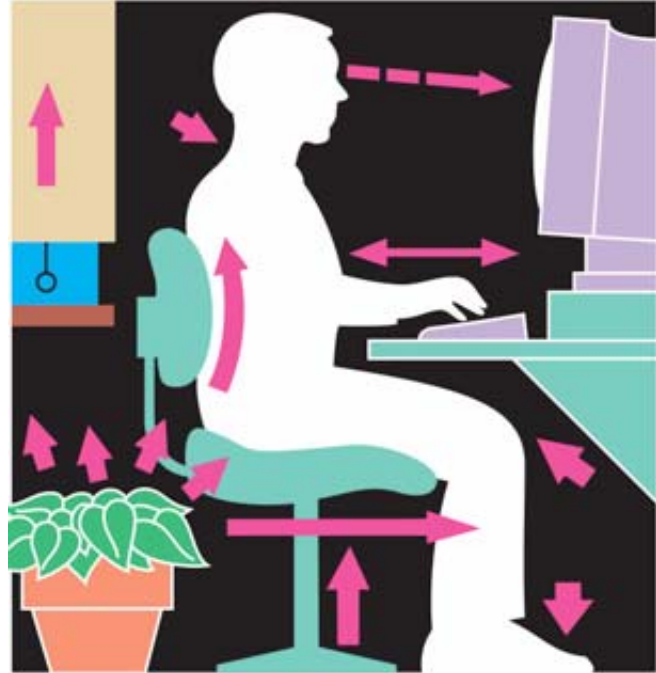


## You Might Want to Sit Down for This

Posted By [Mark Sisson](#) On October 6, 2009 @ 9:20 am In [Health, Primal Health](#) | [145 Comments](#)

Or maybe you don't. It turns out that sitting in a chair – that time honored tradition we commonly associate with rest, relaxation, and recuperation (don't forget mind-numbing work, too!) – is actually bad for us. At least, the way we approach sitting is health harmful. The occasional dalliance with a straight-backed office chair probably isn't a problem, but **when we spend most of our waking life sitting (or, even worse, slumping over) in a chair, we invite disaster.** Such sedentarism is a real problem, and a recent one. [Grok](#) <sup>[7]</sup> certainly wasn't bound to a desk. He may have had more off time than we do (if modern hunter-gatherers are any indication), but he didn't spend it subjecting his body to extended bouts of unnatural contortions. And there's the other big difference: the way we sit is completely unnatural. Instead of sprawling out, hands behind our heads, legs outstretched, we moderns "relax" in a chair – a piece of furniture with which we have relatively new relations.



From "[You Don't Know Squat](#) <sup>[8]</sup>" we already know that the modern toilet has only been in widespread use for a couple centuries, and that squatting to eliminate is probably healthier than the sit/strain method, but did you know that chairs with backs enjoy a similar history? Until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, chairs were reserved primarily for the gilded classes. Kings, noblemen, and statesmen used them to conduct business and hold court, while your average serf or peon was relegated to sitting on (backless) stools, chests, or even the ground. Early chairs were ornate, exquisite things made from expensive materials like ivory, ebony, bronze, and acacia wood, and festooned with beautiful carvings and designs; there weren't any latter-day Ikea-equivalents pumping out mock kings' thrones made of particle board. Handcrafted works of art versus utilitarian products mass-produced in China. **It almost sounds like chairs are the refined grains of the furniture world.**

**Or, perhaps more fittingly, chairs are like shoes.** They are modern "conveniences" that force our anatomy into unnatural positions while purporting to correct flaws intrinsic to our bodies. It's not enough to say that we're merely imperfect (because we are); we also possess a fatal flaw that only manmade artifice can fix. But what chairs actually do is make sitting in a harmful, slumped-over position for a dangerously long period of time possible. We bypass our built-in feedback system (you know – pain, fatigue, a sore back) that would usually direct us to correct our posture (or even, maybe, stand up and move around) and we're able to sit relatively pain-free for hours on end – but the damage is being done. We're getting progressively weaker and more reliant on the backing of the chair, and when we're in a sitting situation without added back support, we can't handle it. Instead of sitting erect, shoulders back, back strong and straight, head held high, we just slump over and use the curvature of our spine to support our bodies. If you don't believe me, start watching for it. Look around at your colleagues, family, and friends, and see how they sit. Most people slump. Can you imagine the average modern twelve year old, weaned on couches and cheap school seating, slumping over in the saddle as he tries to ride down game on his first hunting trip with the warriors of the tribe? It simply wouldn't work.

A weak back, one might argue, can be mitigated by proper exercises. Deadlifts and squats (performed correctly and with great form, of course) will strengthen your "core" and could even make up for all the sitting (personally, I wouldn't risk it – and it seems kinda counterproductive, like eating a bunch of fish oil just so you can "safely" consume tons of Omega 6s), but are there any other health disadvantages to leading a sedentary, chair-ridden lifestyle? Of course there are.

There's the obesity that accompanies sloth. Time spent sitting is invariably time spent not moving. While there is the occasional IT guy who bikes to work, hits the gym on his lunch break, and gets plenty of exercise when he's not sitting in front of a computer, one Australian [study](#) <sup>[9]</sup> (PDF) concluded that **office workers "who spend high amounts of time sitting at work tend to spend high amounts of time sitting on non work days."** In other words, it may be that sedentary employees really do take their work home with them. That same study also found that those same workers had a flawed perception of their own activity levels. The most sedentary ones thought they were getting way more exercise than they actually were. As many of you probably know, a false sense of progress can be highly detrimental to one's actual progress.

How do you feel about blood clots in your legs? A New Zealand (boy, they're really on top of things in that part of the world, huh?) study [found](#) <sup>[10]</sup> that **workers who spent an inordinate amount of time sitting at their desks were at a higher risk of developing deep vein thrombosis (DVT).** Workers who used computers while sitting were at an even high risk.

Metabolic syndrome, our favorite catchall for most of what ails the average insulin-resistant, obese, and near-diabetic, may also be exacerbated by "too little exercise and too much sitting." Epidemiological [data suggesting](#) <sup>[11]</sup> that "excessive sitting" is a health hazard prompted researchers to suggest amending current health guidelines, while **one scientist even compared** <sup>[12]</sup> **the deleterious impact of sitting to smoking regularly.** When doctors compare anything to smoking, you know they mean business (of course, that same doctor'd probably include saturated fat among the condemned, but no one's perfect).

If all that isn't enough to convince you, perhaps a healthy dose of all cause mortality will. The study, conducted by the American College of Sports Medicine, [examined](#) <sup>[13]</sup> whether time spent sitting was an independent indicator of all cause mortality. They factored in leisure time, alcohol and tobacco consumption, and even physical activity (the lack thereof which is a common explanation of the poor health ramifications of too much sitting), but sitting time emerged as a factor – "independent of leisure time physical activity." Physical activity certainly helps reduce mortality rates, but it might not be enough, and the downsides of sitting can't completely be explained away by a reduction in exercise.

**So, what can we do about it?** In a world of cheap and plentiful chairs, where social protocol and workplace decorum usually demand we plop down for hours at a time, how can the dedicated [Primal Blueprinter](#) <sup>[14]</sup> maintain postural health and strength and avoid the pitfalls of too much sitting?

Ideally, we would **avoid sitting for prolonged periods of time** – or at all. That's not very realistic, of course, for obvious reasons. We aren't all Ernest Hemingway, who famously said, "writing and travel broaden your ass if not your mind and I like to write standing up." (Hemingway's method of standing to type is actually really nice if you can manage it; my editor, Aaron, has been doing so the past few weeks after injuring his back, and he may never go back to chairs if he can help it.) If your boss is the type to [let you nap](#) <sup>[15]</sup> and [wear Vibrams to work](#) <sup>[16]</sup>, you might be able to work the "no-chair" angle, but I wouldn't count on it.

**If standing isn't an option, trying using a stool to sit.** Humans used stools (also chests, or anything backless) for centuries before chairs became common, so we can definitely manage without the support. The advantage of the stool is that you aren't tempted to use the backing; in fact, you're almost forced to maintain a straight, strong back by virtue of the backing's absence. Sit up straight and tall. You'll probably have to consciously maintain the arch in your back (like you're deadlifting) at first, but in time your muscles will strengthen and you'll grow accustomed to the position. Oh, if you don't mind looking ridiculous, I suppose you could use a big yoga/balance ball as a seat.

Constantly **punctuating your day with bouts of activity** is a decent way to reduce the damage. Eight hours of sitting broken up into digestible chunks and interspersed with random walks and stretches every fifteen minutes is always going to be better than eight hours of uninterrupted sitting. You could take a walk for your lunch break, or even find time to hit the gym. Just get up, get moving, and get your blood flowing, and do it as often as you can (while still getting your work done, of course).

This may belong strictly in the "flights of fancy" category, but a [treadmill desk](#) <sup>[17]</sup> **would certainly help you avoid sitting**. Plus, you could switch it off and simply stand and work if you ever got tired of walking.

If you absolutely can't leave your chair for the entire day, you'll need to put more emphasis on getting **regular exercise outside of work**. Eating Primally should be helping you avoid sugar crashes and [carb comas](#) <sup>[18]</sup>, so mustering enough energy for a session shouldn't be a problem. The reason we formally "workout" is because our lives are so structured; Grok didn't decide to exercise. His life just naturally required it. In a way, both you and Grok need to exercise to survive – only for slightly different reasons.

To sum things up, staying on your feet or lounging instead of sitting in a chair are the most desirable ways to deal with the chair problem. Modern conveniences, though, have basically become modern requirements, and we're going to have to deal with sitting in chairs from time to time. When you are forced into sitting, maintain a strong torso. Keep your shoulders back, your chest up, and your lower back tight and slightly arched. Get up every fifteen minutes or so for a brisk walk. Explore alternative seating arrangements, like yoga balls or backless stools that force you to exercise proper postural positioning. Think of the chair as a crutch – use when needed, but don't rely on it too much or you'll never be able to graduate.

**Above all, don't get hung up on the fact that you sit in a chair everyday.** [Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good](#) <sup>[19]</sup>. It's not going to kill you as long as you take the necessary steps to minimize the negative impact of sitting.

**And now for some questions:** How many hours a day do you spend sitting in a chair? What type of chair do you use? How would you rate your posture? Has anyone successfully negotiated a standing working environment at their office job? If so, share your experience. Let me know your thoughts in the comment board. Thanks, everyone!

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