How sitting is harming your health

More and more of us spend the bulk of our day sitting down. As both work and home life become more sedentary, reducing the amount of time spent sitting down takes some conscious effort. But with the health risks of a sedentary life becoming more apparent, it is an effort worth making.

Why are we sitting more?

The advancement of technology over the years has helped make us less and less active. In the world of work, for example, many of us spend our days sat in front of a computer screen, Taking only occasional breaks during the day, and even enjoying a relaxed, inactive lunch break.

At home, technology has (thankfully!) lent a helping hand with the housework, giving us fewer – or at least less strenuous – chores and more leisure time. Plenty of hobbies are enjoyed sitting down too, with many of us regularly indulging in evenings in front of the TV, watching films, playing video games, using the computer or simply sat enjoying the company of friends and family.

Prolonged sitting – the risks

So, what are the risks of prolonged sitting? There are many associated health problems, but perhaps the most striking is its impact on the likelihood of death. According to the American Cancer Society, men who sit for more than six hours have a 20 per cent higher chance of dying than those who do so for less than three; in women, that figure rises to 40 per cent.

Various studies have also linked excessive sitting with conditions such as type 2 diabetes and even cancer, as well as issues such as being overweight or obese. It can also potentially weaken muscles and bones.

What's particularly important to bear in mind is that these risks remain even if you exercise regularly. For example, you still risk the ill effects of a sedentary lifestyle if you usually sit all day at work, go to the gym at the end of the day, and spend the evening relaxing on the sofa.

What happens to our bodies when we sit?

A variety of things happen to the body when we sit. Scientists believe that sitting for a long time slows the body's metabolism, essentially meaning we're less able to break down body fat, and regulate blood sugar and blood pressure. Certainly, sitting expends almost no energy at all, which isn't good news for our waistlines.

During extended periods of sitting, the enzymes that break down body fat drop, while after two hours, good cholesterol falls significantly too. Plus, electrical activity in the legs shuts off, and calorie burning falls dramatically.

What counts as sedentary?

Many of us now spend the bulk of our day sedentary – but what does this actually mean? It is essentially any activity during which you are either sitting or lying down, which means watching TV, reading, travelling in a car, bus or train, using a computer and the suchlike all counts. Sleep, however, is excluded from your sedentary hours.

Tips on sitting less

So, how can we sit less? While it can take a little time and effort to change your habits in the long term, there are plenty of quick, simple changes you can make to reduce your sedentary hours. Here are some of the best:

- Swap sitting in the office for standing: Standing desks are great for helping to break the cycle of extended periods of sitting. However, bear in mind that you shouldn't stand all day either, as this can cause musculoskeletal problems. Instead, regularly switch between sitting and standing, aiming for a 50/50 balance.
- Stand on public transport.
- Stand or walk around while you're on the phone.
- Swap the lift for the stairs.
- Trade a few hours in front of the TV for a more active hobby, such as walking or an active game.
- Be a little more active with the housework: For example, wash up manually occasionally instead of using the dishwasher.