

'Chair disease' -- give it a rest

April 10 2009, By Julie Deardorff

Where are you right now? Lounging on an overstuffed couch with the newspaper and a cup of coffee? Sitting on a kitchen chair taking in the news online? Well, I hope you're sitting down for this bit of news. (Or maybe you should stand.) Your chair is slowly killing you.

Chair disease, as we like to call it, is an increasingly common malady in the U.S. that is almost always caused by spending too much time parked on your rear end.

It's not really the chair's fault, though. The problem is that most of us sit wrong -- slouched forward with our earlobes in front of our shoulders -- and for hours without moving. The result? Avoidable chair-related ailments, including flabby butts, an increased risk of [blood clots](#), and back pain, the leading cause of disability in Americans younger than 45. And if you haven't had back pain yet, just wait; it affects 8 out of 10 people at some point during their life, according to the National Institutes of Health.

"Sitting all day is the worst thing in the world you can do for your back," said Dr. Joel Press, the medical director of the Spine & Sports Institute at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago.

Sitting puts nearly twice the stress on the [spine](#) as standing; slouching while you sit increases the pressure even more.

That's because hunching forward pushes the back into a convex or C shape. Try it. Now pull your shoulders back and together and put your

hand on your lower back. That natural concave curve is what you want; slouching fatigues and overstretches the ligaments, causing back pain.

To make matters worse, we stay in this bad C position for hours, barely moving, even when nature calls. "I'll be crashing on a project and three hours go by," said Kara Carmichael, a 23-year-old Chicago publicist with back pain who sits behind her computer for 10 hours a day.

Movement is key because the disks in our vertebrae are important shock absorbers. When we're locked in one position, we're starving the disks of nutrients.

"There's no vascular or nerve supply to the disks; they get their nutrition through movement," said Press. "If we're not moving, everything stagnates."

Sitting also tightens and shortens the psoas -- the strong hip flexor -- which can affect how the pelvis rotates and increase the load on the low back. If you've ever run on a treadmill at lunch and then returned to your desk, you know hamstrings also tighten when we sit. The gluteal muscles, meanwhile, stretch out, but they're not being used so they turn off and get weaker (flabbier!) from sitting.

A significant portion of low back pain can be remedied by avoiding what Chicago physical therapist Vincent Gutierrez calls the two most common sitting mistakes: leaning forward and having the chair too low. But to really stand up to chair disease, try the following techniques:

Change your position. It's the single best thing you can do, said Press. Stand up every 15 to 30 minutes and clasp your hands behind your back. Take a phone call standing instead of sitting or simply straighten up, contract your abs and lean back. Carmichael sets an Outlook reminder to tell her to move.

Get a treadmill desk. Lisa Solomon operates her law practice from her New York home while walking on a treadmill at 2.2 miles per hour. She has lost 8 pounds. For more information: officewalkers.ning.com.

Squat. It's more comfortable than sitting because most of the weight of the abdomen is supported on the thighs, said Dr. William Meller, author of "Evolution Rx" (Perigee, \$24.95). "Also squatting with the head and shoulders held up and back keeps the low back in its natural position," he told me.

Use a lumbar roll. About 6 inches in diameter, lumbar rolls help maintain the natural curve of the back. You can use them in a car or the office. Order one -- along with Angela Kneale's useful handbook "Desk Pilates" -- at optp.com.

Practice Robin McKenzie's "slouch-overcorrect" exercise. If you have to sit for a long time, move from slouched position to upright 10 to 15 times, three times a day, said Gutierrez. (If you know yoga, it's similar to moving between a seated cat and cow pose.) For more info: mckenziemdt.org.

Try the Alexander Technique. Studies have shown that the postural educational system is an effective treatment for [back pain](#) when used in conjunction with exercise. alexandertechnique.com

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