

Sit up and take notice

Sitting in a chair is bad for you. It compresses the spinal discs and when the disc degenerates, the compression leads to irritation and pain

Of all the ordinary, everyday things that can wreck one's back, sitting is the one activity that people least suspect of being the culprit.

Oddly enough, the wisdom you gain from sitting – the profound awareness that too much of it is bad for you – often happens when you realise how much it hurts to pull yourself into a standing position. But often, for ageing baby boomers who feel they need to take care of themselves after enduring long commutes to work, high doses of daily stress and long periods of being on their feet, sitting becomes a sort of reward. It is like that fancy dessert, full of sugar and fat, that you know is bad for you but that you eat because you feel you deserve or have somehow earned it.

Why is sitting in a chair so bad for you? It compresses the spinal discs and this compression has consequences. If you have degeneration of the disc – the disc is the structure that separates one vertebra from another – then the disc compression that results from sitting with your back in the typical swayback position will generally exacerbate your condition. That is because the compression closes up the space that the nerve root occupies; less room means irritation and pain. "No matter what age you are, sitting for more than 30 minutes at a time without getting up compresses your disc," said Mr Andrew Was, a chiropractor in New York.

"When a disc is compressed, the water of the gelatinous material in the disc is squished out a little bit. You don't want that to happen because the disc begins to dry out."

Absence of fluid also presages the onset of arthritis, he said.

How does a person who wants to preserve a healthy spine – or, at least, strive to maintain mobility in an already compromised spine – negotiate the necessary evils of sitting? Here are some tips:

>> Do not sit for more than 20 or 30 minutes at a time in the seated position. "If you must, set a timer to tell you it's time to get up," says Ms Eleanor Demos, a licensed massage therapist in Sarasota, Florida. If you have a coffee and tea station in your work area, return the paraphernalia to the kitchen – and periodically visit there to take a caffeine break. And, if you work at home and you have been promising yourself that you will cook more, now is the time to assemble a snack – or lunch or dinner – in 20-minute segments by walking to your culinary destination.

>> When you do sit, pick the best chair. Mr Was gives his highest marks to the chair that gives you lumbar support, as well as a lot of options, such as allowing you to sit in a combined kneeling-and-sitting position, or to adopt the waterfall position where your knees are lower than your buttocks. Ms Demos cautions against a one-chair-fits-all attitude: Buying a chair too constructed to a particular shape works only for a person with that shape, she says.

>> Perform certain typically "sitting" tasks like reading, making telephone calls, balancing your chequebook, organising or reviewing paper work and even writing letters or notes, while standing



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Stand up for some tasks

[Continued from page 14]

up. What was reputedly good enough for the standing scribes Goethe, Grass and Hemingway should be good enough for you, too. "See if there's any place you can create a work area for a lecturer," suggests Ms Demos. And Mr Was notes that by standing, you decrease the pressure on the often vulnerable fifth lumbar disc by half.

>>Perch. Ms Demos suggests trying periodic "perching", which means sitting with just the sitting bone on the front edge of a tall stool. "With your feet on the floor, your weight is partially in your seat and partially in your legs, and your lumbar spine is not so compressed," she says.

>>Lie down. Studies have shown that lying flat on your back exerts much lighter pressure on the spine than sitting, and even standing. "While lying on the floor on your back, put your feet up for 15 minutes to open up the back, to stretch it out a little bit," says Mr Was.

>>Be smart when exercising or doing yoga. "Not all yoga positions are helpful, and sitting positions can be tough," says Mr Was. "The thing that breaks the disc apart the most is compression of the spine with rotation."

>>Do not bend forward at the waist, which compresses the front part of

the vertebrae, says Mr Was, who advises loosening up your hamstrings so that motion takes place in your hip joints, legs and knees. And try not to engage your back – it is the ability to have more range of motion in your lower back and neck that causes the problems, he says.

>>Beware the fatigue factor. True, when one sits in a supportive chair, part of the work is done by the chair. "If you have balanced your body on the line of gravity, you will not slouch until the muscles that are engaged become fatigued," Ms Demos says. "But once your muscles do get tired, you will slouch, no matter what chair you're sitting on." That is why movement, which increases circulation to the muscles, is so important.

>>Move the waste paper bin far, far away from your desk, and walk – do not toss – your rubbish into it.

Perhaps the best way to ensure a healthy spine is recognising that sitting is not to be taken for granted, but used judiciously to help achieve professional and personal goals. Do not regard getting up every 20 minutes and moving around to energise your muscles as an inconvenience. Think of it as the big payoff: It is your way of earning the privilege of sitting some more.

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