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WARNING: Do You Recognize These 7 Symptoms of Sitting too Much?

My head was throbbing, my back ached, and my stomach was incredibly angry at me.

And that was just day three. Not of an illness or a trip in a spacecraft to the outer reaches of the galaxy.

It was day three of an inadvertent experiment I performed on myself. Of sitting at work all day rather than standing. In only five days, I discovered 7 symptoms of sitting too much. They are short-term, potentially long lasting, and they were killing my productivity.

I'm literally dancing in place as I write this.

Seriously, I am listening to a techno music mix (it helps me to concentrate when I write) and I am constantly moving. All because I am not sitting.

Unlike last week when I worked from home, where I do not have a standing desk, at my office closer to downtown Fort Wayne I have a standing desk. That was the longest I'd worked while sitting in more than two years. I had no idea how bad I would feel.

Below is a short list of symptoms I felt from sitting too much. If you want more information, check out some of the [long-term dangers of sitting too much](#).

7 symptoms of sitting too much

1. The headaches

I don't normally get headaches. I might experience a few per year in the course of normal life.

But just one week of sitting all day while working led to headaches during each of the last four days of workweek. Four straight days of headaches. That's approximately equal to the total number I had in all of 2013.

Sometime between 1pm and 4pm each day I would start to get a dull headache. As the day progressed, it got worse and worse. To the point that I had to take medication.

That might not seem like a big deal, but in our house we usually throw away 80% of the bottles of ibuprofen we buy because they expire before we can even think about taking that many pills. That's how little we use. And yet I was popping them for four straight days.

2. Shoulder pain

Midway through the day, my shoulders would start to ache as well. By the end of the day, the tension was almost unbearable.

3. Digestive problems

Nine years ago, when I was starting my second business, I complained to my mom that my stomach was always hurting.

She asked me what I did after lunch each day. I told her that I did the same thing after each meal. I sat back down at my desk and worked. Sure, I got in my one-hour workout in the morning, but after each meal every day, I was working with my butt parked in a chair.

She advised me to spend even just five minutes after each meal walking around or stretching. It helped my digestion immensely. But I still had mild stomachaches more frequently than I thought I should.

When I switched to a standing desk almost three years ago, those problems became considerably less frequent. In fact, on days when I am working at the office with a standing desk, I almost never experience any digestive problems.

Last week, working while sitting all day, they returned. With a vengeance. Like nothing I'd experienced in years.

Thankfully, I remembered my mom's advice midweek and was able to get through the remainder of the week.

4. Fatigue

How is it possible to be more tired after sitting all day than standing all day?

I haven't the slightest clue. But it's entirely true. I was exhausted at the end of each day.

Other than my morning workout, I'd done practically nothing all day other than sit and yet all I wanted to do at the end of the day was...sit. I had no energy left. My ability to stay engaged with a book or with a conversation was minimal. I was worn out from doing nothing.

5. Poor sleep

Another observation I took away from this experiment was that my sleep was awful.

Despite being exhausted and having no problems falling asleep, my sleep was restless and fitful. I normally fall asleep and that is that. I am asleep until the alarm goes off or it's time to wake up. Not last week.

As a result of getting a lower quality of sleep at night, I'd wake up later in the day, which started a vicious cycle.

6. Inability to focus

Usually I am able to stay on task for 35-45 minutes with no problems. Then I take a quick bathroom break, get some water or a snack, walk around or relax for five minutes. Then it's back to work.

Last week, it was all I could do to hold my concentration for 20 minutes. I could not concentrate or focus at all.

I'm sure the shoulder aches, headaches, upset stomach, and fatigue didn't help, but the main reason why is that I was restless. I like to move. I pace when I talk or think. I think best when I am standing or walking.

Sitting still all week was essentially stripping away my creativity and focus and my work suffered as a result.

7. Swollen ankles, backaches, and more

At this point, it sounds like I might have aged 38 years in one week. Well, it really did feel like that.

All that sitting was killing my back, my ankles were swelling (turns out that is common for office workers), and my hips were as tight as could be. After sitting for the most part of four hours, just climbing the stairs became difficult unless I walked around for a bit first.

That's what my experiment showed me. It was not a fun week. And that was just one week of short-term problems. The [long-term dangers of sitting](#) are even worse.

So how do you avoid killing your short-term productivity and sitting yourself to death long-term? Here are 5 practical ways.

5 ways to avoid sitting yourself to death

1. Standing desk

If it's possible, get a standing desk.

If you work for yourself, buy one as soon as possible. Stay tuned for an upcoming post about transitioning to one. I learned a lot when I did it three years ago.

They don't have to be expensive. You can buy a top of the line one for less than \$1,000 or do as I did and buy a bar table (it cost us \$140 total). I use a stool that cost less than \$30 when I need to sit for a moment.

Or you can build your own for less than \$200 (I'll show you how in a future post).

2. Talk to your employer

If you work for someone else, talk to your employer about the benefit of standing desks. Their \$300-400 investment is more than worth it when it increases your productivity even 5%.

Consider that they are likely (on the average) paying \$50,000 in salary and \$5,000+ in healthcare costs. If they get 5% more productivity (low estimate) and save even \$100 in healthcare costs, they recoup the cost of the desks within a month or two.

If nothing else, have them consider treadmill desk stations or something similar so that you can do mundane tasks such as checking email or viewing training videos while walking at a slow pace or standing.

3. Get up and move

If you must sit, at least set a timer to get up and move every 30 minutes. Yes, that is 16 times a day in an 8-hour workday.

You don't have to run a mile every 30 minutes, just get up and stretch for 30 seconds or walk to the water cooler and back. Every third break or so, take 5 minutes to refocus and go for a quick walk or do a [five-minute workout](#).

These little changes can make a big difference.

4. Be antsy

If you must sit all day, try to be a little antsy.

Wiggle a little in your seat. Shift from one side to the other. Hold one leg up for 30 seconds, then the other. Change the height of your monitor by an inch every hour or two. Raise your arms above your head. Do anything to keep moving just a little bit.

5. Sit up straight

Your mom was right. That's all there is to it.

Again, if you must sit, try sitting on a balance ball or something wobbly. This will improve your posture (and thus, your blood flow).

Action item: Make a list of ways you are going to sit less next week and act on them.

Bottom line

Prolonged sitting is dangerous. I truly believe that it is killing us as a nation. Maybe that's extreme, but I believe it to be true.

You must do everything you can, both for your long-term health and for your short-term well-being and productivity to get up, get moving, and stand tall.

What's on your action item list? How are you going to sit less next week?