

The health concerns in spending the day sitting

March 3 2014, by Misha Noble-Hearle



Travis Saunders, taking a break from sitting. Credit: Nick Pearce

We know that being a couch potato may not be the picture of health. But it's allowed as long as we are physically active, right?

Wrong.

Travis Saunders, a Heart and Stroke Postdoctoral Fellow in Dalhousie's Department of Medicine, researches the detrimental [health](#) impacts of [sitting](#). Earlier this week, he shared insights with Dal staff and faculty at

a professional development workshop hosted by Human Resources as part of its "Move More Month" initiative.

"I was one of those people we now refer to as an 'active [couch potato](#),'" says Dr. Saunders, a cross-country athlete during his undergraduate and masters degrees. "I was running an hour to an hour and a half a day, so far exceeding any [physical activity](#) guidelines," he explains. "I thought I was this paragon of health, but then I realized that actually it's still bad for me to sit, even if I'm active."

Along with guidance from his PhD supervisor, Dr. Saunders's interest in the relationship between sedentary activity and health came from his personal experience. (He received a PhD in Human Kinetics from the University of Ottawa last year.)

Shutting down the pumps

So just how is sitting affecting us?

Dr. Saunders' research focuses on how sitting, even paired with physical activity, can be bad for our health. It prevents sugar and fat from being pumped out of our blood and into our muscles. He says our muscles are like little vacuum pumps that suck the sugar and fat out of our blood.

"So when we're sitting for a long time, those pumps shut off and no more sugar and fat are going into your muscles. It just ends up building up in your blood."

What's more, sitting in front of a computer or a TV screen contributes further to a decline in health because it makes us want to eat more. Saunders says mental work, along with food commercials on television, is actually proven to increase our food intake.

"That's why sitting in front of a TV is bad because not only are you not burning calories, not only are these metabolic pumps shutting off in your muscle, but you are also going to eat more than you need," Dr. Saunders says. "It's this trifecta of bad health."

Getting off the chair

That's tough news to hear when so much of our work is done at a computer desk. Luckily, Dr. Saunders's research also looks at how we can reverse our sitting habits.

While working on his PhD research, Dr. Saunders practiced what he was starting to preach. He set up a homemade standing workstation using an IKEA laptop desk and old textbooks, allowing him to switch between standing and sitting. He encouraged hospital staff to do "walking meetings," arranging for timed, planned-out walking routes to be put on the database so groups could book according to how much time was needed.

"You can review your day and look at what things you do sitting down because you need to sit, and what things you do sitting down because that's just what you do," says Dr. Saunders.

Even getting up every 20 or 30 minutes can get the blood flowing and the [vacuum pumps](#) working.

Dr. Saunders is originally from Fredericton, and was excited by the opportunity to move back to the Maritimes for his post-doctoral work.

"It's a way to take research and translate it so someone who doesn't have a research background can understand why the research matters and why it applies to their lives," he says.

Provided by Dalhousie University

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