

Study takes a stand against prolonged sitting

February 6 2020, by Alison Hewitt



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In many workplaces, standing desks and walking meetings are addressing the health dangers of sitting too long each day, but for universities, the natural question is how to make such adjustments in classrooms.

The question appealed to emerita dance professor Angelia Leung from

the UCLA Department of World Arts & Cultures/Dance. Sitting too long was never an issue for Leung's students. But for most [college students](#), desk time is more common than dance time. In an unusual collaboration between the arts and sciences, Leung partnered with Burt Cowgill, an assistant adjunct professor with the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, to find ways to help students stand up.

The team's research, published in the *Journal of American College Health* on Feb. 6, hit upon solutions that students and faculty can agree on. However, all the solutions, the researchers said, would work best if joined with an effort to raise awareness about the [health risks](#) of extended sitting, aimed at shifting cultural expectations and norms about classroom etiquette.

Studies have linked prolonged sitting with [health](#) concerns such as heart disease, cancer, depression, diabetes and obesity. Research shows that breaking up long periods of sitting with movement at least once an hour reduces those risks, while regular exercise at other times of day does not. Despite those risks, the UCLA research found that more than half of students interviewed considered it socially unacceptable to stand up and stretch in the middle of class, and nearly two-thirds felt the same about doing so during smaller discussion sections.

"A [cultural change](#) has to take place—that it's OK to take a stretch break, to stand up during a lecture, to fidget when needed—it's 'good' for health's sake," Leung said. "My students have an advantage because [dance classes](#) naturally involve movement, but we can extend these benefits to any class on campus with something as simple as short stretching breaks—no dancing required."

Some of the recommendations are simple: Take hourly breaks to stand and stretch during long classes; include more small-group activities that require moving to switch desks; and create more open classrooms with

space to walk without squeezing past fellow students and room to install standing desk areas.

To overcome [social stigma](#), the researchers emphasized that professors and instructors will have to take the lead in offering group breaks at specific times rather than suggesting students can get up any time they wish. They also recommended that professors encourage students to get up and move during their breaks; and suggested that university administrators establish policies that call for building more open classrooms and adding features such as adjustable desks.

The research was funded by the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative Center at UCLA, a campuswide effort to make the healthy choice the easy choice, and to promote wellness through education and research. For the study, moderators conducted eight focus-group interviews and guided discussions with 66 UCLA students, roughly half undergraduates and half graduate students. The researchers also interviewed eight faculty members. The researchers looked at how much students and faculty knew about the health risks of sitting, investigated whether the participants could avoid prolonged sitting in class, and gathered ideas for feasible solutions.

"We need to change the way we teach so that we can offer more standing breaks, create opportunities for in-class movement, and even change the built environment so that there's more room for moving around," Cowgill said.

But even though the study found that students and faculty were broadly supportive of making changes, Cowgill said he doubts people will, ahem, stand up against the status quo if there isn't also an effort to raise awareness about the health risks. Social norms and the physical classroom environment are barriers, but awareness is the biggest obstacle.

Cowgill said he was surprised to learn that many of the participants were not aware of the health problems that prolonged sitting can cause, even for people who are otherwise active. "Many people thought they would be fine if they also squeezed in a 30-minute jog, and that's just not what research shows us."

The researchers expect the study will shed light on misconceptions about the health risks of extended sitting, and help faculty and students learn the ways they can work together to stand up and stretch.

More information: Burton O. Cowgill et al. Get up, stand up, stand up for your health! Faculty and student perspectives on addressing prolonged sitting in university settings, *Journal of American College Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/07448481.2019.1661419](https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1661419)

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

Citation: Study takes a stand against prolonged sitting (2020, February 6) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-prolonged.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--