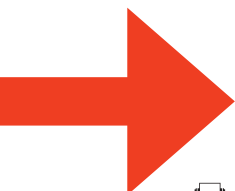




↑ It's time to rethink your workload.

Don't Let Your Desk Kill You

A GQ Get-off-Your-Ass Primer




Josh Dean

Go to the gym all you want. But the evidence is mounting that even the most herculean workout won't save you from the damage done at the office. (We're talking heart attacks, persistent pudginess, even, um, rectal cancer.) Here's how to emancipate yourself from your desk chair—and live a lot longer

● **IN THE ANNALS** of science, the correlation between sitting on your ass for a living and having generally poor health is unlikely to be recalled as a great breakthrough. And yet, a recent report saying essentially just that landed on the front page of *The New York Times* and sparked a conflagration of similar stories

around the world, prompting newscasters to report, from their rollie chairs, that we might be sitting ourselves to death on the job.

The deal is this: Scientists at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center, a Louisiana-based research facility that focuses on all things related to fat-assed-ness, linked America's obesity epidemic to a precipitous loss of "active" jobs since 1960—which would describe pretty much any vocation that requires you to move more than your fingers and eyeballs. Their methodology was simple. The team,

YOUR LAID-BACK POSTURE PLAN

led by Timothy Church, M.D., assigned intensity values to various jobs and, using national employment data, watched as those labeled “moderate intensity” (farming, making stuff) plummeted while more sedentary jobs (mine, yours) skyrocketed. They figured that the average American man now burns 140 fewer calories per day than his farming and factory-working forebearers, and then asked a mathematician to figure out how this would translate into weight gain. And whaddya know? The resulting estimate was nearly identical to the average weight Americans *actually* gained over the same period.

In effect, the work of Church and his crew—subsequently linked to a growing body of data about the hazards of sedentary life—helped expose what could be a huge scientific blind spot. For years we’ve assumed that as long as we meet the basic requirements for exercise (twenty minutes a day, three times a week), we’d be fine. But here’s the problem: For the past two decades or so, the overall level of exercise among Americans hasn’t changed, while our waistlines have ballooned. Scientists previously explained this collective inflation of our pleated trousers by looking at our diet—Big Macs and Big Gulps—but Church’s group introduced a new and scary possibility: The doughy roll around your middle has as much or more to do with what we’re doing, or not doing, at work.

WE WERE WARNED that this could be a problem. The first study on workplace torpidity appeared back in 1953, when a Scottish scientist named Jerry Morris showed that bus conductors, who moved around a lot, had fewer heart attacks than the drivers, who sat all day. Drivers, he



BAD

→ **Don’t be the office Quasimodo—head forward, arched back, slumped shoulders. Spineless dudes never get the corner office. Plus, bad posture opens a Pandora’s box of health issues (back problems, reduced core strength, etc.).**



GOOD

→ **It’s simple: Just relax. Pull the monitor forward (1). Use a keyboard extender (2). Support your feet (3). And sit with your back flush against a good chair (4). Our pick? The reclinerlike Freedom Headrest from Humanscale.**

found, had noticeably higher rates of heart disease than conductors, despite coming from the same social class and otherwise leading the same kinds of lives. They were twice as likely to die of a heart attack.

When I traveled to meet Church and his colleagues at Pennington, a campus of tan, low-slung buildings populated by hundreds of people in lab coats, epidemiologist Peter Katzmarzyk admitted that Morris was ahead of his time; he just didn’t fully understand his results. It wasn’t the activity of the conductors that made them healthy as much as it was the inactivity of the drivers that made them unhealthy. In other words, much in the same way that running 10Ks won’t save a smoker from lung cancer, going to the gym isn’t going to save you from your desk job.

The root of the problem, Katzmarzyk told me, is that our body is based on a blueprint drawn up in a world before desks. “If you think about our hunter-gatherer existence, the whole drive was to capture as much energy from the environment with as little effort as possible.” If early man chased a chipmunk for two hours, the resulting calories wouldn’t make up for those burned in the process. To compensate, he got smart. He built traps. Conserving energy, Katzmarzyk says, “is what our physiology is designed for. We’re still very efficient. We’re designed to store energy.” Which, because we don’t have to expend as much of any more, is one reason why we’re fat.

According to Katzmarzyk, our metabolism was optimized for our Stone Age ancestors, who had to stalk and kill (or at least forage) for lunch. We modern men need only dispatch an assistant to meet the Quiznos guy in the lobby. In other words, we have to work (much) less hard to find (much) more abundant food. Scientists use the term “energy efficiency ratio” to measure this calories-in, calories-out relationship, and it’s been calculated that today’s human consumes 50 percent more food per calorie burned.

For an accelerated example of what happens to us as we go from active to sedentary, scientists observed Inuits in Northern Canada from 1970 to 1990 and saw remarkable deterioration in physical conditioning as they stopped hunting seals and started eating Cheetos. Closer to home, we’ve got Ye Olde Amish. The average Amish man takes 18,425 steps a day. Those of us chained to desks are lucky to top 5,000.

IN THEORY, I shouldn’t have this problem. As a self-employed writer with no set hours or boss to answer to, I should be moving around plenty. But it turns out I’m not.



↑ A (modified) standing desk.

THE 3-STEP MOBILITY PLAN

ACT LIKE A EUROPEAN → It's a good idea to get up every thirty minutes. But we like to get up for something. One idea: Exchange your supersized coffee for a few single espressos, like the Europeans do (just skip the smoking).

OR A HUNTER-GATHERER → Move your office stuff (Scotch tape, printer) out of your cubical. Oh, and go get your lunch instead of ordering in. It's the small things that could save you from a big coronary.

OR AT LEAST HOMO ERECTUS → You don't have to run a half marathon at lunch—the simple act of standing improves blood flow and engages your muscles from feet to trunk. (How bad is sitting? Tests show that seated schlubs have zero muscle activity.)

For the past year, I've been writing a book, and my schedule has been much closer to the one America's office workers live by. Most days I rise, eat, take the subway a few stops, walk a couple blocks, and sit at a desk for eight to ten hours. The only thing that might be exceptional about my case is that I am borderline compulsive about drinking water, so I probably make more trips to the bathroom than the average guy.

This is actually a great (accidental) strategy, according to Catrine Tudor-Locke, director of the Walking Behavior Laboratory at Pennington. Tudor-Locke is one of the world's foremost evangelists for walking, and it was inevitable that I would arrive at her office to find her at her "walking desk"—basically, a desk mated to a treadmill. Tudor-Locke's is a \$6,000 Steelcase model, but she says that a co-worker built his own using a cheap treadmill and some Target shelving.

Tudor-Locke stepped down and told me to give the desk a try. "It starts at about 0.3 miles an hour," she says. "Now take it up to one mile an hour and see how that feels. Then go ahead and type. Now take it up to two, which is where my world is." I typed some lines; it was no harder than if I was sitting. "You can type without looking," she says. "That's good." People who have to look at the keyboard have trouble. In total, Tudor-Locke walks about three hours—which at two miles per hour means that she walks eight miles. With help from an in-house exercise lab, she found that she burns 2,472 calories more per week than she would have in her chair.

The metric that matters most to Tudor-Locke is total steps taken. When she added the walking desk to an already active lifestyle ("like, scary active"), she was peaking at over 28,000 steps a day. In comparison, she says, office workers are

probably under 5,000, with the most sedentary among us in the realm of 3,500. These were just guesses, she says, because the whole realm of study is very new. The truth could be worse. (When I strapped on a pedometer, the results were depressing: on days where I rode to my office, I averaged about 3,000 steps; when I took the train, it jumped to 4,000 a day.)

I asked if Tudor-Locke had a chair I might pull up to continue our interview, and she gave me a look as if I'd just suggested we take golf carts next door for stuffed-crust pizza. Instead, she led me into the swampy afternoon, where she set a swift pace as we conducted a "walking meeting," a favorite conceit of hers.

Americans, Tudor-Locke says, are the world leaders in not walking. By looking at a national study of Americans who wore pedometers with accelerometers—which

show cadences—Tudor-Locke can tell whether people are walking, running, sitting, or "puttering around." In many cases, she says, "it is very clear that the individuals' highest single minute in the morning is when they are walking from their car to the office." The next spike, then, is "at the end of the day when they walk from their office to the car." This pattern appears "again and again."

Tudor-Locke and Church suspect the minimum steps an American should take a day is in the neighborhood of 8,000. For the guy who's strolling only to and from his car, that's a lot of extra walking: 100 steps a minute (a reasonable pace) is 1,000 in ten minutes, so to get to 8,000 from 3,000 you're talking fifty more minutes of walk-

ing. Even I don't drink that much water.

Not surprisingly, evidence shows that individuals who are more active—again, think Amish—have a lower risk of heart disease and diabetes. (One recent study even connected prolonged sitting to colorectal cancer.) And scientists are

STANDING—ON TOP OF THE WORLD

→ Three guys (you may have heard of them) who *don't* sit on their asses all day.



DONALD RUMSFELD

"I've used a stand-up desk steadily since 1969. I have one at home and one at the office. I don't

know about any health benefits; I just get more done standing up. It works. Oh, and when folks drop by the office to raise a question, if you're standing up, the meetings tend to be shorter."



AARON SCHOCK (R-ILL.)

"They should call it sitting—not running—for office. So I make a

concerted effort to make my duties as active as possible. On parade routes, I'm always running up and down. I don't fight for the front parking spot—I park in the middle and walk in. I'll get up and talk to my employees at their desks. None of those things alone are the solution, but it all adds up."



MIKHAIL PROKHOROV, OLIGARCH

"I don't use a computer, but that doesn't mean

I'm not stuck at my desk. So I have a little gym in my office, and when I have time, I kickbox. I just move to keep the blood flowing. I also ask my colleagues to train with me. We do martial arts."

WALKABOUT

WE COUNTED THE STEPS SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO

STEPS PER DAY

Amish Man

18,425

Healthy American

8,000+

Office Worker

5,000

The Author

3,000

The Chinos-Appropriate Workout

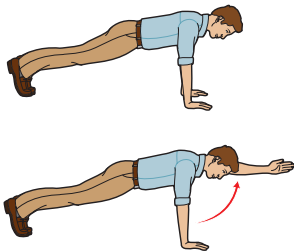
→ Going to the gym is great—but it may not be enough. “If you do everything right in the gym and everything wrong the rest of the day, it’s eight hours to one,” says Craig Friedman of Athletes’ Performance in Phoenix. Try these moves at home or (if you have a door) in the office.

Core Competency

► It’s the most important muscle group in the body—everything between your knees and shoulders—and it softens to Jell-O in a desk chair.

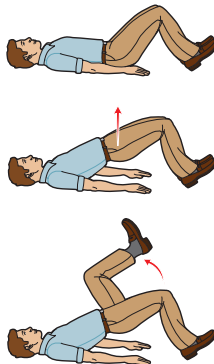
Modified Plank

Do a plank, then lift your left arm and hold it. Return to the starting position and raise your right. Do eight on each side.



Glute Bridge

Okay, this one’s embarrassing in public. Lie on your back with your knees bent and push your butt off the ground into bridge position. Lift one knee off the ground, then lower it. Switch legs. Do eight reps for each leg, two sets.

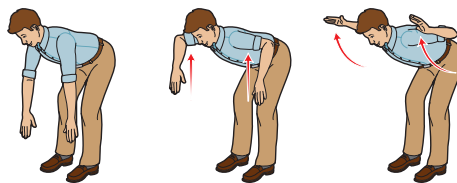


Upper Level Strategy

► Bad posture can lead to knotted-up shoulders and, eventually, the dreaded turtleneck. Here’s how to unwind.

Standing Ls

Bend at the waist, and raise your elbows toward the ceiling to ninety degrees. At shoulder height, rotate your forearms upward. Reverse the motion and repeat eight times.



Foam Shoulder Roll

Roll from your shoulders down the middle of the back and back up again. If a spot feels sore, hold it there a sec; that muscle needs a good rubdown.



Lower management

► Stretching your hips and calves prevents a witches brew of joint and flexibility problems.



The Reverse Lunge

Step back into a lunge with your right leg. Lean forward and bring your right hand to the floor and your left elbow to your left knee. Hold it, then, with both hands down, raise your hips to the sky. Return standing. Do five times each side; two sets.

Miniband Walk

Take ten steps laterally right, then left. Do five reps.



“LET’S LIAISE ON THE CLIMBING WALL!”

► THE MOST ACTIVE OFFICES

SAS

• Software CEO Jim Goodnight sounds vaguely Orwellian when explaining his company’s investment in a 66,000-square-foot fitness facility: “We know our employees are more productive and creative when they’re healthy, energized, and feel good.” Well, no one here is complaining: 96 percent of SAS employees use the jumbo gym.

TIMBERLAND

• A soccer field, a bike shop, canoes and kayaks upon request—Timberland’s campus is like a fitness lab where work occasionally gets done. “We’re an outdoors company, and our employees are sort of hardwired to get moving,” says CEO Jeff Swartz.

NEW BELGIUM BREWERY

• After a year at New Belgium, every employee is given a cruiser bike to explore the fifty-acre campus’s dirt tracks. “Some of our best ideas happen on rides,” says CEO Kim Jordan. For the other big breakthroughs, check over at the climbing wall.—RAFI KOHAN

decades with the loss of active jobs,” Church says. This means that even if sitting doesn’t give you heart disease, it will most likely foil any fantasies you may have of a twilight inspired by *Cocoon*. You see, while modern medicine is doing a good job of phasing out premature death—“it cannot assure a high quality of life.” According to Church, we lose 1 percent of muscle mass per year starting sometime in our forties or fifties, and the loss of physically active jobs likely accelerates this. “If you do not have enough strength to chase your grandchildren or lift yourself off the toilet,” he says, “then your quality of life will not be great.”

And those are just the physical ramifications. It seems obvious that all these inactive days in climate-controlled rooms are bumming us all out as well. The satisfaction of completing a market analysis can hardly compare to the feeling of finishing up a house foundation. Church says that looking at how mental well-being correlates to your activity at work is one of many related studies he’d like to do, given the time (and funding), but that existing research shows that physical activity relieves depression. “I jokingly say that the strongest benefits of physical activity are above the shoulders,” he told me. “You just feel good when you go cut wood; I mean, you really do. Mow the damn lawn! You’ll feel better afterwards.”

JOSH DEAN recently logged 18,564 steps while walking his son to sleep.