

Get off the Couch and Improve Your Heart's Health

A red office chair is positioned in the foreground of an office setting. A white sign with a torn bottom edge is clipped to the back of the chair. The sign has the text "OUT OF OFFICE" on the first line, "GONE TO" on the second line, and "THE GYM!" on the third line, all written in black, hand-drawn capital letters. The background shows a desk with a computer monitor, a keyboard, and a pen holder.

Getting too much rest can kill you. That's the conclusion of a study presented by the American Heart Association.

Researchers who surveyed more than 500 older Americans found that long periods of sitting were strongly linked to an excess build-up of pericardial fat around the heart. This fat build-up is stubbornly persistent, even if the individual later engages in a much healthier and more active lifestyle.

According to the study of 504 Americans with an average age of 65, prolonged periods of sitting were connected with pericardial fat, but not other kinds of fat, like visceral fat (fat buildup around other organs) and subcutaneous fat (fat around the belly, aka "love handles".)

Further, these other kinds of fat could be reduced through resuming a healthy diet and regular exercise. Pericardial fat remained around the heart, regardless of the exercise regimen. The study shows that pericardial fat is much more permanent and damaging than other kinds of fat.

Research has also shown that deposits of pericardial fat are much better predictors of future severe heart problems than other indicators, including body mass index and waist circumference.

Pericardial fat is also associated with cholesterol blockages. Therefore, if you must sit for long periods of time because of your line of work or for other physical reasons, it is extra important that you moderate cholesterol intake and watch your levels of good and bad cholesterol.

Appearances Can Be Deceiving

While high pericardial fat levels are generally correlated with a high body mass index, and by extension obesity, even thin people can have dangerously high levels of

pericardial fat. On the other end of the spectrum, obese people can have moderate levels of pericardial fat, especially if they live a generally active lifestyle.

What You Can Do

Get off the couch. Do not spend long periods of time sitting, whether at work or at home. Make a point of getting up and moving around every few hours.

Exercise. To prohibit excess pericardial fat build-up, exercising once a day or even several times per week is not enough. The exercise must be *more frequent* in order to break up long periods of sitting.

Invest in a standing desk. If you work long hours at a desk, consider getting a stand-up or treadmill desk. This keeps your legs moving, even as you type.

Eat healthy. Moderate your caloric intake and adjust it to your body type and metabolism. Identify your weight maintenance caloric intake levels and stay at or below it. Limit bad cholesterol, saturated fats, and partially hydrogenated corn or vegetable oil.

Consider prescription medication. While it doesn't work miracles, and there are disadvantages, some medications are effective at moderating cholesterol levels and high blood pressure, therefore reducing the long-term risk of heart attack.

While most people have an instinctive understanding that obesity is bad, few people understand the perniciousness of pericardial fat and its connection with heart disease. Ask your doctor about getting tested for your pericardial fat levels, especially if you lead a relatively sedentary lifestyle.