

# Doctor gives 4 ways to avoid one behavior that's aging your heart

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One of the primary risk factors of heart disease and premature heart aging is being sedentary—sitting for hours at a time. But what if your job requires you to sit in front of a computer all day without much time to get up and move around?

On World Heart Day, *AMA Wire*® sat down with primary care physician Michael Rakotz, MD, director of chronic disease prevention with the AMA's Improving Health Outcomes initiative, to talk about simple ways you can avoid being sedentary and reduce your risk of developing heart disease.

***AMA Wire:* The impact of a sedentary lifestyle on heart health is a newer concept. What do patients need to know?**

**Dr. Rakotz:** While we have known for many years that being sedentary is not good for you, something newer that we have learned is that even physically fit people who exercise for an hour or more a day may be at increased risk for heart disease if they are sedentary for long periods throughout the day.

Being sedentary is spending too much time sitting down and is very common for people who work at desks with computers or who watch a lot of television. Both are sedentary behaviors. The authors of a [recent study](#) estimate that each hour of sitting may significantly increase your risk of heart disease.

Too much sitting may even have a greater negative impact on your heart health than the benefits of exercise can undo. So you want to avoid those long periods of sitting any way that you can.

The study showed that if you sit at work for seven hours a day, exercise doesn't eliminate the risk of developing heart disease due to that sedentary behavior—even if you exercise for an hour every day. The prolonged sitting is thought to be an independent risk for developing heart disease. It's not enough to just exercise for your health. Running, walking briskly or riding a bike and then sitting for seven hours a day at a desk without standing up puts you at higher risk for developing heart disease than if you did the exercise and weren't sedentary all day.

***AMA Wire: Is the workplace the biggest culprit in encouraging sedentary behavior?***

**Dr. Rakotz:** If you work in an office environment, absolutely. There are plenty of people who may be sitting at home in front of a TV or computer for six or seven hours at a time, but I do think that the office setting is the major culprit.

Two years ago, the AMA adopted policy against sedentary behavior at the 2013 Annual Meeting, encouraging employers to offer fitness balls and standing work stations in order to promote a healthier work environment.

***AMA Wire: What are your recommendations for avoiding being sedentary throughout the workday?***

**Dr. Rakotz:** If you're stuck at a desk working for long hours, standing, moving around a little bit or taking a short walk is much better for you than sitting all day. These things aren't necessarily going to build cardiovascular fitness, but they will likely help prevent the risk factor of being sedentary.

When you get a lunch break, take a walk. Short periods of physical activity during the day can help offset those long periods of being sedentary. There are a few other things you can build into your workday:

- **Stand up for a few minutes.** Walk around if you can. One to three minutes is all that's necessary. Do this every half hour if you can. When you're at home watching TV or reading, stand up at least once every 30 minutes for a few minutes as well.

- **Try walking meetings.** I like to encourage these. When you can take a walk, do it—whether it's inside or outside, it doesn't matter. When walking meetings are encouraged, I think it is one of the healthiest things for the culture of a company.
- **Take the stairs.** Here at the AMA, the stairwells are carpeted, and there are motivational slogans painted on the walls. When I first started working here, it was one of the things that really impressed me. Take the stairs whenever you can instead of the elevator.
- **Sit on a fitness ball at your desk instead of a traditional chair (if you are able).** You'll be using your core muscles and your legs when you do this. It breaks the sedentary cycle without adding any time to your day.