

Work at a desk? Then experts have worrying news... Why sitting down can be as bad for you as smoking

- Sitting for too long more than doubles your risk of diabetes
- Inactivity is the fourth biggest killer of adults in Britain
- An average British adult spends up to 70 per cent of their day sitting down

By [Angela Epstein for the Daily Mail](#)

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Leaning over her nine-year-old daughter to check on her homework, Kate Lurie felt an agonising pain rip through her right shoulder and reverberate across her back.

'I'd never felt anything like it before — it was awful, like hot pins burning into my skin,' she says. 'I crumpled on to a chair, trying to stop myself howling in pain.'

Thinking she'd just pulled a muscle, 40-year-old Kate spent the next couple of days on round-the-clock painkillers. But the throbbing in her back and shoulders was so intense, it made doing simple tasks such as driving almost impossible.

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The throbbing pain in Kate's back and made doing simple tasks such as driving almost impossible (picture posed by model)

She made an appointment with a physiotherapist three days later and was stunned to hear that the pain was not caused by an injury but by 20 years of sitting at a desk.

Kate, a copywriter from Manchester, is one of a growing number of British women suffering from the barely recognised phenomenon 'sitting-down disease'.

As several recent studies have discovered, sitting for too long can be as dangerous to health as smoking. It more than doubles your risk of diabetes and is linked with an increase in heart disease. In fact, inactivity is the fourth biggest killer of adults, according to the World Health Organisation.

But the scariest thing of all? The results are the same however much exercise people do when they're not sitting down.

'Most people think that if they work out every day that's all they need to do,' says researcher Dr Emma Wilmot, whose team at the University of Leicester analysed 18 studies incorporating a total of 800,000 people. 'But those with jobs that require sitting all day may still be at risk.'

'When we sit for long periods of time, enzyme changes occur in our muscles that can lead to increased blood sugar levels. The effects happen very quickly, and regular exercise won't fully protect you.'

There are a growing number of British women suffering from the barely recognised phenomenon 'sitting-down disease' (picture posed by model)

The average British adult spends between 50 and 70 per cent of their day sitting down, whether it's behind the wheel of a car or in front of a desk, computer or TV.

Dr Wilmot's team found that people who sit the longest are twice as likely to have diabetes or heart disease as those who sit the least. The team also reported that sitting for long periods appears to raise the risk of kidney disease, especially in women. And that muscle, joint and back pain, like that experienced by Kate Lurie, is becoming increasingly common among middle-class high-achievers, who spend most of their lives sitting down.

Mother-of-three Kate used to spend ten hours a day sitting down to work as a science-journal copywriter. She now wishes she'd been warned of the damage her desk job could do to her health.

She said: 'It's been awful hitting 40 and suddenly feeling like an old woman. I thought I was quite fit and active, yet, suddenly, doing something as simple as lifting up one of my children, or driving, has become catastrophically painful.'

'I think of myself as a young woman with a young family but I've been hobbling around like I'm in my dotage. All because I've spent years in a desk job.'

'It's been awful hitting 40 and suddenly feeling like an old woman. I thought I was quite fit and active, yet, suddenly lifting up one of my children has become catastrophically painful'

Kate Lurie

The back pain that told her something was seriously wrong hit in January. She'd never experienced any problems before but her physiotherapist was far from surprised.

Kate recalls: 'She told me that years of hunching over a keyboard had caused the muscles in my back to shorten, and the tissues to become like rope.'

'I used to spend hours at my desk every day, and I wouldn't take a lunch break, I'd just eat a sandwich I'd brought from home. I'd be exhausted after a day at work, and flake out on the sofa. I could probably count the minutes I was vertical each day on one hand.'

'Before I got the back pain, I'd already eased up on my hours and gone part-time. But that clearly didn't make any difference — the damage had already been done.'

Nearly one in four workers blame their aches and pains on working in the same position for long periods of time. They take a total of ten million sick days a year, costing the British economy £5.7 billion.

Tim Allardyce, a Surrey-based osteopath and chartered physiotherapist, says: 'The body needs mobility. Our spines are comprised of 26 mobile blocks of bone (vertebrae) which rotate, bend, extend, and are designed for movement. Knees, hips, ankles and feet are all mobile joints, too.'

'Sit in a chair for hours a day, five days a week and the spine does not move, the knees and hips are held in a flexed position, your body will get stiff, the muscles get weak and your body gets sore.'

'Hunching over a computer increases compression through the discs in the spine and causes stiffness and pain. It can even lead to a disc prolapse — known as a slipped disc.' Leicester-based chiropractor Tim Hutchful says that symptoms often creep up without any warning. 'I use what I call the paperclip analogy,' he explains.

'You could bend a paperclip once a day for a month and it will still function as a paperclip. Then one day it will just break. I treat women all the time who think they have a new injury but it is in fact the result of years of desk work. Their injury is caused by what's known as postural fixity — being stuck in one place.'

Hunching over a computer increases compression through the discs in the spine and causes stiffness and pain (picture posed by model)

Women who wear stilettos and pencil skirts to work are particularly vulnerable, he adds. High heels tip the pelvis forward when we walk or stand, weakening the back's muscles, while slim-fitting skirts restrict our joints' range of movement when we sit down. And all the experts seem to agree there's no way of knowing when 'sitting-down disease' will get you.

In the case of Helen Bee, a 39-year-old graphic designer from Cheshire, it started five years ago in her right knee.

'It began to feel stiff as I worked — I'm a computer-based designer, with a number of clients for whom

I produce leaflets and booklets. When meeting a deadline, I stayed at my desk for up to ten hours a day.' The pain gradually worsened and 18 months ago it seriously affected Helen's mobility. 'I could barely get myself up the stairs, let alone go for walks with my husband, Rob. I felt awful,' she says.

Experts agree there's no way of knowing when 'sitting-down disease' will get you (picture posed by model)

'In my mind I was a young, active woman, but I was hobbling like a frail old lady. I had this deep throbbing in my knee all the time. Yet I hadn't banged or injured it.'

A hospital scan revealed acute inflammation around the knee joint. 'My doctor said it was due to spending so long at my desk, and possibly because of the way I sat — leaning on one side, which was why only one knee was affected. I must have always sat like that, without realising.'

Helen has now had eight months of physiotherapy involving stretching exercises for her knee. She has also been told to lose a stone — she weighs 13st and is 5ft 7ins — as excess weight puts more pressure on her knee.

So can you protect yourself from sitting-down disease without quitting your job? One simple way is not to sit for longer than 30 minutes without getting up. 'Get a glass of water or go to speak to a colleague rather than email them,' advises Mr Allardyce.

Not slouching is vital, too. 'Sit up with your back straight, your shoulders down and back, and elbows relaxed at your sides,' says Ian Harding, a consultant orthopaedic surgeon. 'Your buttocks should touch the back of the chair. And avoid crossing your legs.'

Your keyboard should be directly in front of you, with the mouse by its side, and your phone close to you to avoid repetitive reaching. 'You should be able to keep your wrist straight, shoulders relaxed and elbows by your side while using it,' says Mr Harding.

Physiotherapy sessions to massage and manipulate the spine help combat back pain (picture posed by models)

If you already have back, shoulder or knee pain, it's important to be as active as possible as this will help your joints recover mobility.

Clare Swatman, a 39-year-old mother of three from Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, has been seeing an osteopath for her bad back. 'I spent years working for a magazine, and it was such a busy job I'd spend hours at my desk, battling with a stiff back. I used to crawl out of the office in agony.'

She also does hour-long bootcamp sessions twice a week. 'I was in a lot of pain and felt very stiff but my osteopath said it would be all right and the camp leader knows my history. Since doing core strengthening exercises, my back feels much better.'

Meanwhile, Kate Lurie has found that after eight physiotherapy sessions to massage and manipulate her spine,



and a regular exercise programme at home to stretch her shoulders and neck, she also feels much better.

'I can't rewrite the past but I don't want to go through that pain again,' she says. 'Every time I slouch at my desk I remind myself of the agony and I straighten myself up immediately.'

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