

GET UP, STAND UP



Law librarians reject their office chairs' cold embrace

By Mike VanderHeijden

I suffer from the unhealthy habit of worrying about my health. I try to eat well, supplementing with vitamins. I exercise. I floss. I use sunscreen before stepping out to check the mail. I avoid talking on my cell phone. For a few months in the late '90s, I worried about the health effects of electromagnetic fields. So a year or so ago, when studies began circulating about the harms associated with prolonged sitting, I had to take action. Or if not "action," per se, the situation at least required some research.

Lively Up Yourself

I found that the recent trend away from sitting at work in favor of alternative standing arrangements isn't necessarily the result of some news-induced hysteria; it's soundly science-induced. Genuine scientists are concluding that too much sitting likely increases the risk of a host of unsavory diseases and conditions.

Apparently, when you're sitting for extended periods, levels of something called lipoprotein lipase (an enzyme that takes fat away from the bloodstream) begin to fall, which in turn leaves fat free to cause trouble in your body—serious trouble, like chronic kidney disease, diabetes, hypertension, obesity, cancer, and heart disease, according to “Television Viewing Time and Risk of Chronic Kidney Disease in Adults: The AusDiab Study,” published in *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*. And according to “Sedentary Behaviour and Life Expectancy in the USA: A Cause-Deleted Life Table Analysis,” published in *BMJ Open* August 1, 2012, it doesn't matter whether you exercise two hours a day or not at all; the levels still drop when you drop down into your ergonomically designed office chair.

An Australian study by J. Lennert Veerman, “Television Viewing Time and Reduced Life Expectance: A Life Table Analysis,” published in *British Journal of Sports Medicine* in 2011, estimated that prolonged TV viewing (a marker of how much time is spent sitting) reduces life expectancy at birth by 1.8 years in men and 1.5 years in women. Conversely, “Sedentary Behaviour and Life Expectancy in the USA: A Cause-Deleted Life Table Analysis” indicates that if we wish to increase our life expectancy by 1.4 to 2 years, we should limit sitting to less than three hours per day and TV viewing to less than two hours per day. That's assuming a causal relationship between sitting and mortality—a relationship on which there is still disagreement.

Setting risks aside, there are more immediate benefits to standing. Standing for just two and a half hours per day reportedly burns 350 calories! Of course, ask any supermarket cashier, and they'll tell you that prolonged standing can also cause discomfort, varicose veins, night cramps, clogged arteries, and back pain. So if you're migrating to a standing desk, don't throw out your chair.

After catching up on all of this information, I made the decision to try using a standing desk while working. Until recently, I imagine most people who stood at work did so for specific medical reasons. During my first week of standing, I thought I was mimicking another stander—the vigorous Ernest

Hemingway. So I was surprised when colleagues and faculty who noticed the new arrangement kindly inquired instead about my health.

But times change. For example, Facebook Inc. is adding 10 to 15 standing workstations per week. There are now approximately 350 standing workstations for its 3,000 employees. And when I asked a few fellow librarians who stand at work why they do so, they voiced a desire to improve their health, generally, and said they were motivated to do so by the recent attention on the dangers of prolonged sitting. So perhaps it won't be long before standing at work turns no more heads than ergonomic keyboards and core-strengthening office chairs.

Treat You Right

Some associate directors are already there. Teresa Miguel, the associate librarian for administration at Yale's Lillian Goldman Law Library, considers standing desks to be one option among many for making sure the library is a healthy, productive workplace.

“It's not a luxury item,” explains Miguel. “We appreciate the unseen uniqueness of everyone on the staff, and we're willing to experiment in order to make sure people are happy in their jobs.”

Along the same lines, Elizabeth Farrell, associate director at Florida State University Law Library, puts standing desks in the same category as other ergonomically correct products. “At a previous employer, ergonomics experts periodically evaluated our offices and workstations to make sure that everything was set up correctly—knees, elbows, monitors, all at the proper angles and heights. Although these consultants don't inspect our law library, offering the option to stand and sit at our desks is one thing among many that we can do to accommodate people here.”

An entire article could be dedicated to types of standing desks, workstations, and related considerations for purchasing one model over another. Suffice it to say that it's important to buy something appropriate to its intended use, budgetary constraints, your technological requirements, and possibly your institutional decor.

My initial request to purchase a budget model from a local start-up manufacturer of “cardboard furniture for the urban nomad” (see www.chairigami.com) was not well thought out. What's good for the urban nomad isn't necessarily good for a career law librarian. I settled instead on an all-oak, adjustable-height, podium-style model which sits on top of my conventional desk (ergodesk.com/category/43-ergo-stand-up-desk.aspx). A colleague,

Jason Eiseman, who needed something to accommodate his wider monitor, uses an adjustable height computer workstation (www.safcoproducts.com). If, like Farrell, you intend to change positions many times throughout the day, you might consider something else entirely (www.ergotron.com/tabid/640/Default.aspx).

The good news is none of these options costs more than many popular ergonomic office chairs, which might help justify the costs if you're already in the market for a new chair.

Keep On Moving

Extended periods of standing can be taxing. Flat shoes and a floor pad will help with any initial discomfort. To break up longer periods of standing, I assign specific tasks to sitting: professional reading, selecting, ruminating, reference desk shifts, staff meetings. Farrell similarly splits her time, standing while responding to emails, phone calls, and catching up on professional reading. Eiseman, on the other hand, powers through the day on his feet. He says: “I'd like to stand during meetings and wouldn't mind standing at something like an Apple Genius Bar instead of sitting at a reference desk.”

Many of the people I spoke with said they didn't feel as tired after a day of standing as when they worked sitting down. Tom Boone, reference librarian at Loyola Law School Library captures well the effect of a day spent standing:

“The general malaise which might have otherwise set in toward the end of the day or after work isn't there anymore. I might feel more physically exhausted, but I also fall asleep and wake up more easily than I did before.”

Crediting notions of a “mind-body connection,” Farrell believes that, “When seated, it's easier to let your posture slide. As you slump, so can your attention. But when standing, I feel more engaged.”

My own standing arrangement has had a subtle impact on reference consultations. When standing, my time with patrons seems more collaborative and active, less like a reference meeting than a lab. But, if you stand up, don't assume that the other person is comfortable standing. Farrell advises taking a cue from your guest. If a student comes in and immediately sits down, then sit. So if you spend a good deal of time meeting with patrons in your office or workstation, consider an arrangement that allows you to both sit and stand.

(continued on page 30)

Don't Give Up the Fight

If you think you sit too much, but, for whatever reason, standing for these longer periods is not an option, you might adopt some of these no-cost strategies to keep moving:

- Don't use your library catalog's "virtual shelf browsing" options.
- Drink more water (take more bathroom breaks).

- Send fewer emails to your colleagues (but visit them instead).
- Set an automatic reminder to get up in whatever task manager or calendar you use.
- Stand up when you're on the phone.
- Take the stairs!

Everyone with whom I spoke is pleased with their new standing

arrangements. It's a great relief to me to be able to cross off "serial sitting" from my ever-changing list of health risks. ■

Mike VanderHeijden (*michael.vanderheijden@yale.edu*) is faculty service reference librarian and lecturer in legal research at Yale Law School's Lillian Goldman Law Library in New Haven, Connecticut.