Sitting is the new smoking

Doctors warn too much time on a chair cuts years off your life

SUTHENTIRA GOVENDER

YOU might be sitting on a ticking time bomb, say medical experts who warn that perching on your posterior for hours could slice two years off your life.

Describing it “as the new smoking”, they warned that sitting for long periods might appear harmless, but inactive workers tied to their desks for up to six hours were harming their bodies.

It increased the risk of heart disease, various types of cancer and type 2 diabetes.

Vicki Lambert, a University of Cape Town professor of sports medicine and exercise science, told the South African Heart Congress in Durban that international research showed sedentary behaviour shortened life expectancy to “almost the same degree as smoking, and more than obesity”.

“With our sedentary behaviour we are literally sitting on a ticking time bomb of ill health,” she said. “Sitting for more than three hours a day appears to cut life short by two years even among individuals who exercise regularly.”

Lambert said watching television for more than two hours a day could shorten your lifespan by another 1.4 years.

“The World Health Organisation has already identified physical inactivity as the fourth biggest killer on the planet, ahead of obesity.”

“Smoking is more risky overall,” Lambert said. “But there are more people globally who are inactive than there are smokers. Everyone underestimates the dangers of sitting for too long.”

She said there were no global guidelines for how long “too long” was for sitting at a stretch, but “as South Africans we have to change our mindsets and minimise our sitting time”.

“Because of our corporate culture, where we are almost ubiquitously attached to our computers, it makes it more difficult.”

Lambert has also found that local adolescents are at risk of developing life-threatening diseases because they watch too much television.

“They spend up to three-and-a-half hours on average sitting in front of the television. Screen time is your biggest enemy at home,” she said.

Dr James Levine, director of the Mayo Clinic in the US, who has studied the dangers of a sedentary lifestyle for 15 years, told the Los Angeles Times: “Sitting is more dangerous than smoking, kills more people than HIV and is more treacherous than parachuting. We are sitting ourselves to death.”

Dr Vash Mungal-Singh, head of the Heart and Stroke Foundation, said prolonged sitting had consequences similar to those of high blood pressure and obesity. “In the long term these factors can lead to heart disease, diabetes and stroke,” Mungal-Singh said.

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