Women should take a stand

Encourage women to stand up for their health – whenever they can.

OVER the past 10 years the prevalence of diabetes and obesity (diabesity) in women has risen dramatically.

Currently, two-thirds of Australian women are overweight or obese, and 8% have diabetes.

Up to 10% of the diabetes burden has been attributed to physical inactivity.

Exercise is crucial in fighting off the extra kilos; during midlife Australian women gain an average of half a kilo each year.

Exercise is also an essential component of the prevention, treatment and management of diabetes.

At least one in every two women are trying to lose weight or prevent weight gain, yet fewer than 5% of women are active on a regular basis.

The most frequently reported barrier to women exercising is a lack of time, due to the demands of career and home life.

On average, Australian women spend more than half of their waking hours, approximately 8.5 hours, sitting.

For a number of women this is even longer than the time they spend sleeping.

While sleep confers enormous physiological benefits in the form of restoration, excessive sitting does not.

DANGERS OF SITTING

Similar to physical inactivity, extended sitting has been linked to increased risk of obesity and diabetes.

For women, a two-hour increase in daily TV viewing has been linked to a 23% greater risk of obesity and 14% greater risk of diabetes.

Similarly, for each additional two hours of workplace sitting, the odds of women being obese go up by 5% and the odds of having diabetes rise by 7%.

Importantly, these relationships are independent of exercise time, even in women who complete their 30 minutes of exercise, sitting has adverse health effects.

For women, these findings may also be particularly relevant in midlife where the risk of weight gain and diabetes rises dramatically.

While sitting, your body is expending very low amounts of energy as the large muscles in your legs are not contracting. This has significant impacts not only on energy balance (energy in and energy out) and therefore weight maintenance, but also on blood sugar levels.

As these effects are independent of exercise it has been important to find another solution to reduce the health hazards of too much sitting.

RISK-LOWERING BEHAVIOUR

Recent evidence indicates the activity throughout the waking hours is equally as crucial to achieving optimal health and preventing diabesity as the 30 minutes of exercise.

The most effective solution to reduce diabesity risk with sitting is to take frequent breaks.

Women who take more breaks in sitting are more likely to have smaller waists and a lower risk of diabetes.

These breaks do not have to be strenuous.

Replacing two hours of sitting per day with standing tasks uses the same amount of energy as going for a 30-minute brisk walk.

Such a replacement has been linked to a 9% decreased risk of obesity and 12% reduction in diabetes.

It is vital that the two hours is distributed across the day, as the more frequent the breaks are, the greater the risk reduction.

A good rule of thumb is to avoid sitting continuously for longer than 30 minutes.

WORKPLACES OF THE FUTURE

Work environments can be engineered to facilitate these behaviours through the provision of standing desks, using headsets or speaker phones to enable standing and encouragement of face-to-face communication rather than email.

Not only will these strategies reduce and break up sitting time lower the risk of diabesity by increasing energy expenditure and keeping blood sugar levels within desired ranges, but they are also likely to benefit productivity.

References at medobs.com.au

Jean Hailes for Women’s Health is a national, not-for-profit organisation focusing on clinical care, innovative research and practical educational opportunities for health professionals and women. www.jeanhailes.org.au

How to prevent diabesity

Messages for patients:

• Take every opportunity to move
• Avoid sitting continuously for longer than 30 minutes
• Movement needs to be spread over the course of the day
• Where possible, have walking meetings
• Stand up as often as possible, i.e. while on the phone; have a standing desk
• Sit less
• In addition to reducing sitting time, exercise for at least 30 minutes a day
• Move more, more often.

Activity levels

Current activity levels of Australian women older than 35 years

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