

# Too much time on your rear end? ‘Active sitting’ can make a difference.

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By **Karen Campbell** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 01, 2017

Let’s face it. Between work, meals, travels in the car, computer time, perhaps a little TV binging or settling in with a good book, most of us spend way too much time on our rear ends.

And research suggests all the hours we spend exercising at the gym don’t counteract sitting passively in a chair for hours at a time — which can lead to a wide range of health risks, from joint problems and metabolic issues to shortened life spans.

“We have to get past the notion that it’s OK to just collapse in your chair,” says Cathryn Jakobson Ramin, author of “Crooked: Outwitting the Back Pain Industry and Getting on the Road to Recovery.”

Sitting less is the obvious solution, but when we do need to spend time in a chair, can’t we also sit better? That’s the concept of active sitting. A variety of portable products — like the BackJoy molded seat pads, the BetterBack lumbar support, and the ever-reliable sloped coccyx cushion — head you in the right direction by tilting the pelvis forward to help align the spine into a healthier, more natural posture.

But a burgeoning array of backless chairs and stools for home and office takes active sitting to the next level. Designed with flexible features to encourage movement while you sit, they engage the core muscles and allow a more open angle between torso and legs.

The 90-degree angle once recommended between legs and torso is being revised to a more open angle of about 135 degrees, encouraging a slight forward tilt of the pelvis to align the spine. This takes some of the weight off your tailbone and puts it



JACLYN CAMPANARO

**The Tic Toc chair’s curved slope allows the legs to open and angle down from the hips.**

most conventional office chairs.

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“The best sitting arrangement is where you have active legs,” says Jakobson Ramin. “Essentially a perching one where you make a tripod is best for [overall] health.”

These active sitting chairs encourage near constant micro-movement, which is key — studies show that we tend to be more alert and focused when we’re moving, with blood and oxygen circulating more freely. Fidgeting and wiggling are good for you.

“Our bodies are not designed for sitting, and using an active chair as much as you can is a great idea, even for older people,” says physiatrist Dr. Carol Hartigan, medical director of the Spine Center and the Spine Rehabilitation Program at New England Baptist Hospital.

Most of the options for active seating fall into one of three basic types — balls, benches, and stools.

The simplest, least expensive option is the fitness ball chair, a balance ball in a stable circular frame. You’ve seen them. When you sit on it, the ball’s natural give and slight bounce encourage micro-movements for balance. Because every shift in weight causes a response in the air-filled ball, it makes sitting a more dynamic experience, ergo you don’t get locked into a bad posture for hours at a time.

It’s old-school, but devotees like dancer and arts administrator Marin Orlosky Randow are enthusiastic. “I tried a few different ergonomically-friendly chairs, [but] the exercise ball chair seems to do the trick,” she said. “Plus, I’m generally a fidgety person, so the extra bounciness is welcome.”

The less cumbersome option are wobble stools, which encourage twisting, rocking, leaning, and spinning, usually via fixed seats atop rounded or articulated bases. They’re especially popular in school settings as outlets for fidgety kids. But for adults, slimly designed models, like the Autonomous ErgoStool and Kore Design’s Executive Stool, are sleek and practical. Both are height adjustable, though the ErgoStool has a plusher, comfier cushion and its lowest height is 23 inches high for many standard desks. Kore’s stool is lighter and easy to move from place to place. The VARIchair is similar in function, but its weighted base and articulating pedestal make it less wobbly at higher heights.

A particularly innovative variant of the wobble stool is the German-made Swopper. Its spring system allows the cushioned seat to move not only side to side and forward and back, but up and down. It’s a blast to use. However, at \$600 or more, it’s quite pricey.

Some of the newer active sitting options are bench style. Turner Osler, a former trauma surgeon and epidemiology professor at the University of Vermont, wanted to design a chair that facilitated not just good posture but biochemical health.

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“Our muscles aren’t just motor units but biochemical factories that spin off hormones and enzymes, and all that goes dark when you’re sitting still,” he says. His qor360 chairs build active sitting into sleek designs that look like real furniture but take mindfulness to balance. Each spins, rocks, and tilts in every direction, facilitating a healthy natural posture while keeping the core engaged. Minimal padding is intentional. “We want people to be able to feel their sitting bones so they are able to orient their pelvis and engage their spinal postural reflexes.”

Similarly, the brand new Tic Toc, designed by Fully (formerly Ergo Depot) founder David Kahl, has a beautifully elegant wood seat, but it may be hard and slippery for some. However, its curved slope allows the legs to open and angle down from the hips, like the old kneeling chairs, and the h-base has runners like a rocking chair, enabling a subtle, very natural rocking and twisting.

Even some hard-core active seating enthusiasts recommend starting slowly and swapping out chairs periodically for supportive seating that allows the spine to rest. The good part about all these dynamic chairs is that they’re not so comfortable you’ll be prone to settle in and work nonstop for hours. You’ll need frequent breaks to stand and stretch — and that’s the whole idea anyway, right?

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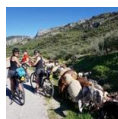
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