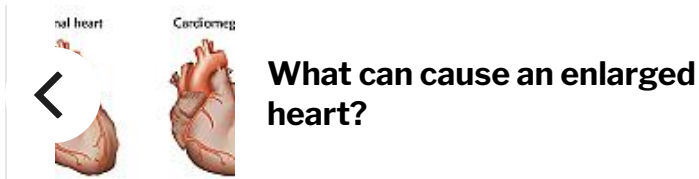


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The truth behind standing desks

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By **Robert H. Shmerling, MD**, Senior Faculty Editor, Harvard Health Publishing; Editorial Advisory Board Member, Harvard Health Publishing



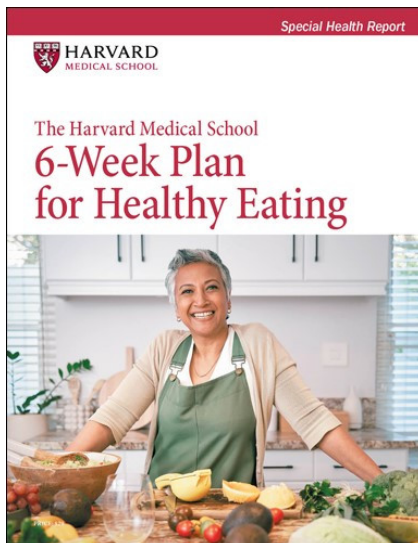
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Are you reading this while standing at your desk? There's a good chance that you are — standing desks are all the rage.

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These desks allow you to work at your "desk job" while standing rather than sitting in a chair. They can be custom built (for thousands of dollars) or you can convert a regular desk into a standing desk at no cost by elevating your computer — one of my colleagues simply placed his computer on a stack of books. Sales of standing desks have soared in recent years; in many cases their sales have far outpaced those of conventional desks.

Personally, I love the idea — rather than sitting all day staring at a computer screen, surely it would be better to be standing (while staring at a computer screen). But, I also love the idea

of studying some of the assumptions surrounding standing desks. A common one is this: certainly it takes more effort – and extra calories – to remain upright rather than sit, and over a course of days or weeks those extra calories would add up to something significant. But is it true that a standing desk can help you avoid weight gain or even lose excess weight?

That's just what researchers publishing in the *[Journal of Physical Activity and Health](#)* tried to answer. (Yes, there is such a journal.) They fitted 74 healthy people with masks that measured oxygen consumption as a reflection of how many calories they burned while doing computer work, watching TV, standing, or walking on a treadmill. Here's what they found:

- While sitting, study subjects burned 80 calories/hour – about the same as typing or watching TV
- While standing, the number of calories burned was only slightly higher than while sitting – about 88 calories/hour
- Walking burned 210 calories/hour.

In other words, use of a standing desk for three hours burns an extra 24 calories, about the same number of calories in a carrot. But walking for just a half hour during your lunch break could burn an extra 100 calories each day.

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Food is Medicine

As nutrition research has accumulated, so has a growing consensus that diet ought to play a larger role in society's overall approach to health. This "food is medicine" philosophy dovetails with a rising interest in lifestyle medicine and whole-person health care. The goal is not simply to treat disease, but to target the root causes of

chronic conditions and, ideally, prevent them before they arise.

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Prior reports of the calories burned by standing versus sitting suggested a much higher calorie burn rate for standing, but this new study actually measured energy expenditure and likely represents a more accurate assessment.

Reasons to stand by your standing desk

While the new study suggests that a standing desk is unlikely to help with weight loss or avoiding weight gain, there may be other reasons to stand while you work. Advocates of standing desks point to studies showing that after a meal, blood sugar levels return to normal faster on days a person spends more time standing. And standing, rather than sitting, may reduce the risk of shoulder and back pain.

Other potential health benefits of a standing desk are *assumed* based on the finding that long hours of sitting are linked with a higher risk of

- obesity
- diabetes
- cardiovascular disease
- cancer (especially cancers of the colon or breast)
- premature death.

But "not sitting" can mean many different things – walking, pacing, or just standing – and as the new study on energy expenditure shows, the health effects of these may not be the same. For most of these potential benefits, rigorous studies of standing desks have not yet been performed. So, the real health impact of a standing desk is not certain.

If you're going to stand at your desk...

Keep in mind that using a standing desk is like any other "intervention" — it can come with "side effects." For example, if you suddenly go from sitting all day to standing all day, you run the risk of developing back, leg, or foot pain; it's better to ease into it by starting with 30 to 60 minutes a day and gradually increasing it. Setting a timer to remind you when to stand or sit (as many experts recommend) can disrupt your concentration, reduce your focus, and reduce your efficiency or creativity. You may want to experiment with different time intervals to find the one that works best for you.

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It's also true that certain tasks — especially those requiring fine motor skills — are more accurately performed while seated. So, a standing desk may not be a good answer for everyone who sits a lot at work.

What's next?

We have seen dramatic changes in the work environment in recent years. These include open floor plans and inflatable exercise balls instead of chairs, as well as standing desks. I have colleagues who have installed a "treadmill desk" that allows them to work on a computer or video conference while walking on a treadmill. There are advantages, and perhaps some risk, that come with each of these changes. But, before we accept them as better – or healthy – we should withhold judgment until we have the benefit of more experience and, ideally, well-designed research.

Okay, you may now sit down.

About the Author



Robert H. Shmerling, MD, Senior Faculty Editor, Harvard Health Publishing; Editorial Advisory Board Member, Harvard Health Publishing

Dr. Robert H. Shmerling is the former clinical chief of the division of rheumatology at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC), and is a current member of the corresponding faculty in medicine at Harvard Medical School. ... [See Full Bio](#)

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