SportsNutrition

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The Athlete's Kitchen

Imagine this: a lean, fit athlete who trains hard, eats heartily, and does not fret about getting fat. While this image holds true for some athletes, it seems far from reality for others. All too often, I listen to my clients complain, *"I should be pencil thin for all the exercise I do."* Or they moan, *"I eat like a bird compared to my friends..."* How could this be?

The answer is many athletes burn far fewer calories than they realize; they are actually couch potatoes the majority of the day. These seemingly active people can be surprisingly sedentary, apart from their purposeful exercise.

Think about it. More than 90% of your waking hours can easily be spent sitting, with TV and computers being the primary culprits that induce sedentary behaviors. The average athletic person sits at breakfast; drives to work, sits all day, drives to the gym, exercises for 45-90 minutes, drives home, sits at dinner, and then sits in front of a screen before going to bed. Even competitive athletes who do double workouts often live a sedentary lifestyle. They generally do little but rest and recover during the non-exercise parts of their day.

Because activity has been engineered out of our lives, non-exercisers and avid athletes alike can easily spend too much time doing too little activity. For example, we no longer use our muscles to open the garage door, lower the car window, wash laundry, or even walk down the hall to ask a colleague a question (email is easier). For many of us, the primary movement we get in a day is our purposeful workout/training session. Hence, the goal of this article is to increase your awareness of your 24-hour activity level, and encourage you to take steps (no pun intended) to move a bit more and sit a bit less throughout the waking hours of your day.

According to Neville Owen, speaker at the American College of Sports Medicine's Annual Meeting (Seattle, May '09), the average person sits 9.3 hours a day. *Even if you are physically fit, this high amount of inactivity is bad for your health.* Exercise reduces health risks in both lean and overweight people, even if the exercise is not associated with weight loss. Owen reports the more a person sits, the higher the risk of mortality. Hence, we not only need to find time to exercise, we also need to find ways to sit less—for example, bike to work, pace when talking on the phone, stand up when writing emails. (Put a cardboard box on top of your desk, and use the box to elevate the height of your laptop computer.) Why, we could even reduce our carbon footprint by hanging laundry outside to dry on a clothesline. That would not only add on exercise but also save energy!

Sitting & Weighting: People who sit a lot tend to gain undesired body fat. The more they sit, the fatter they get. Fatness heightens the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and associated chronic diseases. These health risks start at a young age. A recent study with sedentary teens reports just four weekly 30-minute workouts with moderate aerobic activity was enough to stimulate major health improvements. And isn't it scary to think *teens* are already afflicted with the so-called "diseases of aging"...?

The Sedentary Athlete: Sitting & Weighting

Both sedentary and active people of all ages commonly assume their undesired body fat will melt away effortlessly once they start exercising. Not the case. A study with sedentary people (ages 55 to 78) who added one hour of brisk walking a day indicates they did not lose undesired body fat, despite adding the hour of exercise. They did not eat additional food. How could that be???

They failed to lose weight because they napped more and slept more! In the course of the 24-hour day, they compensated for the extra activity by conserving energy and being more sedentary at other times of the day. Endurance athletes tend to so the same thing. Many fail to acknowledge how inactive they are when they stop training. Hence, exercise enhances fat loss *if* it contributes to a 24-hour calorie deficit. But all too often, athletes burn off 600 calories when training, only to refuel with 800 calories of bon-bons while watching TV ... Counterproductive!

Fidgeters vs sitters: Some (generally weight-conscious) athletes love to be sedentary. They look forward to finishing their workout, settling into their Laz-y-boy chair, putting their feet up, turning on the TV, and vegging-out for hours on end. Yet, other (lean) athletes rarely sit, and when they do, they can't sit still. They shift and wiggle in their chairs, and are very good fidgeters. Their desire to fidget is genetic, starts at birth, and explains why they prefer to relax by puttering (as opposed to sitting and reading)—and why they eat more than the sedentary athletes who "eat like birds."

While fidgeters may enjoy having a "fast metabolism," sedentary athletes often complain they have a "slow metabolism." They eat small portions, yet have undesired body fat. They commonly believe something is wrong with their bodies. The truth is, they barely move their bodies in the course of a day—other than during their five mile run or one hour spin class. Nothing is medically wrong with them. (Or, they may fail to acknowledge how much they actually do eat.)

To their detriment, sedentary athletes (who are good at sitting) tend to burn fewer calories than they realize over the course of the day. Similarly, obese people (who are good at sitting) tend to sit 2.5 hours more than their peers; this saves them about 350 calories a day. A good fidgeter, in comparison, can burn an extra 300 to 500 calories per day. So the question arises: does obesity foster sedentary behavior? Or does the tendency to be sedentary foster obesity?

The Bottom Line If weight is an issue, try to be more active throughout the day, not just during your exercise sessions. Figure out how to move your body in ways that have purpose and meaning: walk the dog, scrub the floor, walk to the post office. Your health and waistline will be glad you did!

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