

The Healthy Way to Sit and Exercise at the Same Time

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Did you know that low back pain is the most common orthopedic disorder in the world? Amazingly, one of the major causes of back pain is sitting. For many of you, this is quite a problem because today, more people work seated than any other position. Typically, people get up and sit to eat, sit to drive to work, sit at work, sit on the drive home, sit to eat dinner and sit in front of a TV until they go to bed. That's a lot of sitting!

Do we have some strange affinity for chairs? It would appear so, yet as I will show you, this affinity is misguided.

While it's quite likely back pain was a problem even before chairs were invented, the arrival of the chair in our lives certainly did nothing but increase the incidence of back pain. This was demonstrated by Dr. Harry Fahrni who studied the Bihl tribe of India. The Bihl didn't use chairs and, at the time of Fahrni's visit, were very primitive. Dr. Fahrni had X-rays taken of the lumbar spines of 450 Bihl tribesmen ranging in age from 15-44. He then took a comparable series of X-rays of heavy laborers in Sweden and an additional series of X-rays of light workers in San Francisco.

Fahrni's studies only confirmed what he knew from experience: The more active Bihl who didn't use chairs had healthier spines than other groups (see [Figure 1](#) for images of healthy and degenerative spines). He found heavy laborers in Sweden had a high incidence of lumbar disc narrowing of 80 percent by age 55. Light workers showed an incidence of 35 percent narrowing by the same age. In stark contrast, the images of the primitive Bihl tribesmen showed an incidence of only 9 percent disc narrowing. ¹

Dr. Fahrni's findings ([Figure 2](#)) show avoiding chairs and having an active lifestyle may be significant contributions to maintenance of a healthy spine. However, being active alone is not enough to avoid back problems.

From a movement perspective, there is no doubt both the light workers in San Francisco and the heavy workers in Sweden were active, so what may account for the difference there? My clinical experience suggests, in the heavy workers, the patterns of movement would be quite repetitious while the light workers may simply not have gotten enough exercise.

Among the Bihl tribesmen and women, the activities of hunting and gathering would ensure adequate movement as well as a myriad of movement patterns. Such consistent,

dynamic activity would serve to pump fluids through the spinal discs, keeping them well nourished. The Swedish and American participants also came from industrialized nations where sitting is commonplace.

However, when we squat the way native tribesmen do ([Figure 3](#)), the torso is supported by the thighs, allowing relaxation and decompression of the spinal column, which can only keep it well hydrated and healthy ([Figure 4](#)).

I Can't Escape My Chair: What Can I Do?

When you sit in chairs for hours each day, the spine doesn't get enough movement and fluid is leached out of the discs. This minimizes incoming nourishment because the discs have no direct blood supply and are fed by a process of absorption facilitated by pressure changes in the case of the spine.

Since the primary constituent of a spinal disc is water, it only makes sense to keep properly hydrated to prevent your discs from dehydrating. This means drinking at least half your body weight in ounces of water daily. A person weighing 200 pounds would need 100 ounces of water daily. I know for a fact drinking water can decrease pain in degenerative spines because I've seen it happen over and over again in my own practice.

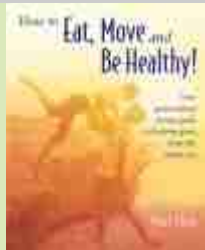
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When we sit much of the day, we typically don't get enough movement or exercise to keep the muscles and ligaments of the spine healthy. As our spinal discs dehydrate they narrow. This causes the ligaments of the spine to become progressively more lax.

This condition is a very common cause of spinal instability that typically leads to more serious lumbar pathology such as pinched nerve roots, disc herniations or arthritic changes that crowd the spinal cord and nerve roots. Symptoms suggestive of spinal instability include:

- Sensing the need to manipulate or adjust your own joints (i.e. popping your own back or neck).
- Pain or discomfort that is relieved by adjusting your own spine, particularly

when the same or similar symptoms return and can again be alleviated by self-manipulation or manipulation by a trained manipulator. In addition to pain, such symptoms as tingling, numbness, spasm, muscle weakness and a sense of tension around a joint that are repeatedly alleviated by manipulation indicate spinal instability.

- Popping or clunking sounds coming from a spinal joint(s) when performing a characteristic movement, such as rotating the spine in one direction, yet this symptom does not result with rotation in the opposite direction.
- A trained professional will notice washboarding, which is hyper-activation of the deep spinal stabilizers in the region of the lax joint.



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But, there is a solution to minimize the detriments of sitting too much -- the Swiss ball ([Figure 5](#)). As a sphere, the Swiss ball has a reduced base of support, moves easily underneath you and requires both the activation of your postural muscles and your balance mechanisms.

A study conducted by Swedish Naprapath Joakim Dettner and his colleagues found, when compared to massage therapy, simply balancing on a Swiss ball in a seated position for one-minute intervals with 30 seconds rest seven times in a row, in place of any other form of treatment, significantly decreased pain and disability. ²