



WELLNESS ALERT: SOLUTIONS FOR SEDENTARY LIFESTYLES

By Catherine Roscoe Barr

Sitting all day – specifically at computers, which most people do for work – can cause muscle imbalances, primarily tightness in the front of the body, also known as the anterior chain: shoulders, chest, abdominals and hips.

Vancouver physiotherapist Dee Malinsky at West Fourth Physio suggests taking mini breaks during the day to stretch the muscles of the anterior chain to reduce tension and improve posture. Research also suggests that reducing prolonged periods of muscular inactivity (the amount of time spent sedentary: at your desk, in your car, on your couch) by taking regular breaks can reduce your risk of chronic disease and premature mortality. The simple act of getting up and taking the time to perform a few stretches will benefit your overall health.

Investing in a foam roller is a great idea to facilitate a good stretch. Malinsky says we're often "guilty of reduced postural awareness," which can "facilitate a head forward positioning, rounded shoulders and upper back, and flexed hips."

Sitting still for prolonged periods also negatively affects your circulation, reducing oxygen supply to the muscles, which can lead to muscle spasms and adversely alters metabolism because inactive muscles require little fuel.

"Foam rollers are a convenient, effective and inexpensive tool for stretching and can help encourage more neutral positioning," says Malinsky.

Using a good-quality foam roller (round, full length rollers are around \$30) to stretch increases the range of motion through which you can move each joint, deepening the stretch. Foam rollers are also a wonderful self-massage tool, as you can roll back and forth over tight areas to work out knots. Malinsky shares three stretches for the shoulders, chest, abdominals and hips that can be done with or without a foam roller. If you don't have a foam roller or feel these moves are too advanced, you can substitute a tightly rolled towel or yoga mat.

Stretch 1: Chest and Shoulders



Lie with your spine along the length of the foam roller, head resting on one end, tailbone on the other end with knees bent and feet flat on the floor.

Lift both arms above your face and, with elbows slightly bent, slowly lower them out toward the floor. Breathe deeply and hold for 30 to 60 seconds.

"Play around with the position of your arms to feel where you're the tightest and hold it there," says Malinsky, who suggests bending and straightening your arms as well as sliding them up and down to find the best stretch.

Stretch 2: Chest and Abdominals



Lie with your spine across the length of the foam roller near the base of your shoulder blades, sit bones on the ground, knees bent and feet flat on the floor.

Cradle your head in your hands, with fingers interlaced to protect your neck, and gently arch backward over top of the roller. Breathe deeply and hold for 30

to 60 seconds.

"This is one of my favourites to encourage extension in the thoracic spine – the upper back – especially following hours of forward flexion," says Malinsky. "However, she cautions to engage your core throughout the stretch to prevent hyperextending or overarched the lower back."

Stretch 3: Hip Flexors



Lie across the length of the foam roller on your tailbone with your shoulder blades and head on the ground, knees bent and feet flat on the floor.

Pull one knee toward your chest by lacing your fingers around the leg just below your kneecap, and extend the opposite leg straight out in front of you. Breathe deeply and hold for 30 to 60 seconds. Return to the starting position and repeat with the other leg.

Again, Malinsky cautions to engage your core during the stretch to ensure the lower back is not hyperextending.