

Sedentary adults

Summary Report No. 5 2005

- South Australian adults are sedentary (sitting) for an average of 51 hours per week.
- Watching TV and working represent a substantial part of this sitting time.
- More active people spend less time watching TV.
- Being sedentary for so many hours a week does not mean that people cannot also be physically active at other times. Many people who are sufficiently physically active spend just as much time sitting as inactive people.

Introduction

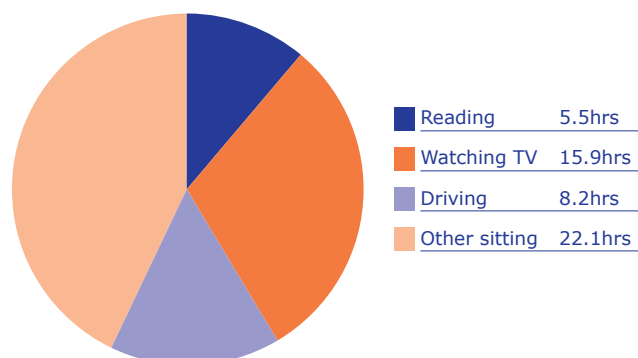
How sedentary are South Australian adults? How much time do they spend sitting? What does this tell us about the rest of their lives, and what are the opportunities to turn inaction into action? The 2004 State Physical Activity Survey asked a sample of 2999 South Australian adults about their sitting habits and preferences.

Hours per week spent sitting

Adults spend a substantial part of their week sitting and therefore it was expected that respondents to the survey would report a large number of hours in these activities. The average length of time that respondents reported sitting during an average week was 51 hours.

Sitting time was measured in four separate categories, as shown in Figure 1.

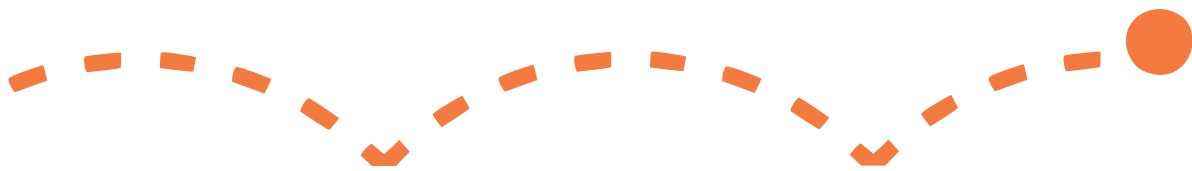
Figure 1 Average hours per week spent sitting



The categories of sitting include reading, watching TV (or other screen based activities such as videos, DVDs, playing video or computer games, or surfing the Internet for fun), and driving a vehicle. The remaining category includes all other sitting activities, for example sitting at work, eating meals, and even sleeping in a chair. It does not include any lying down, such as reclining on a couch or sleeping in bed. This 'other' category includes the greatest number of hours per week (22.1 hours) and this may be mostly due to sitting at work, although this was not measured separately. There is however a pattern for full time employed people to report a much greater number of 'other' sitting hours than other employment categories (Table 1). Full time employment has, for a very large proportion of workers, become characterised as sitting at a desk rather than doing manual work.

Table 1 Hours spent in 'other' sitting (including work, eating meals, sleeping in chair) by employment status

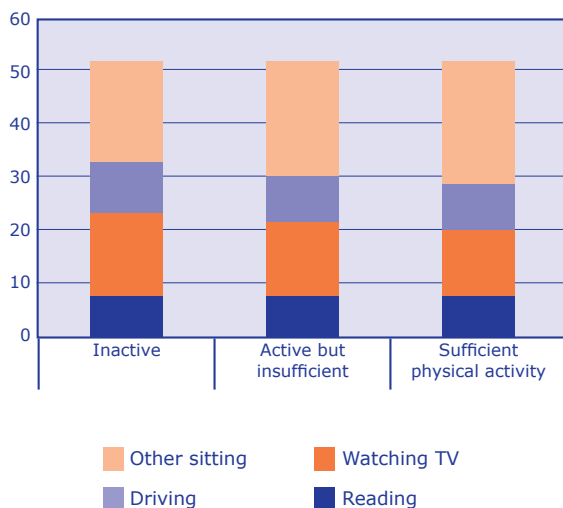
Employment status	'Other' sitting hours
Full time employed	28.9
Part time/casual employed	19.4
Unemployed	13.0
Home duties/retired	16.1



Leisure time physical activity

Levels of physical activity have been described in an earlier brief report as ranging from those reporting no leisure time activity (Inactive) through to those being active but not sufficiently enough to achieve a health benefit (Insufficient Physical Activity), to adults who do enough physical activity to get a health benefit (Sufficient Physical Activity). Figure 2 shows the amount of sitting done by these three broad groups of South Australian adults. The graph shows that regardless of how active people are they average approximately 51 hours of sitting per week.

Figure 2 Hours spent sitting by levels of leisure time physical activity



The types of sitting that are done by people, however, varies by how physically active they are in their leisure time. As physical activity increases (from left to right across Figure 2) the amount of time spent watching TV (or other screen activities) decreases, from 17.6 hours per week in people who are 'inactive' to 15.0 hours in people who do sufficient physical activity. In contrast time spent in 'other' sitting (which includes work) increases with physical activity, from 19.2 hours per week in people who are 'inactive' to 23.3 hours in people who do sufficient physical activity. This may concord with higher amounts of 'other' sitting done by full time employed people, as stated earlier.

There was no difference in time spent sitting for reading (average 5.5 hours per week) or driving (average 8.2 hours per week) between groups at different levels of physical activity.

Conclusion

Sitting is an activity that encompasses a substantial proportion of our lives, on average more than 50 hours per week. Much of this is unavoidable as we fulfil our busy modern lives. Office work has become a more dominant form of employment as manual work decreases. We spend many hours commuting, with driving being predominant. These changes have made us more efficient in our use of time but require us to be more sedentary.

There are also many beneficial activities that are done while sitting. Reading and studying are important, as are absorbing information and skills from using computers and television. And of course relaxation and recreation are important activities to ensure a balance in our busy lives.

It is interesting, however, to consider from where people are to find the time to be more physically active to benefit their health, both physical and mental. The recommendation for people to be moderately active for 150 minutes per week (2½ hours) is a small amount when compared with the amount of time spent sedentary, although not all of this time can be converted to physical activity. The characteristics of people who are already active at a level sufficient to benefit their health appear to show that they use approximately 2½ hours less a week for sitting watching TV (or videos, DVDs or playing video or computer games, or surfing the Internet for pleasure). On the other hand, they also spend an equivalent amount of extra time sitting for 'other' activities, which includes work.

It is too simplistic to blame sedentary activities for the lack of physical activity in a substantial proportion of the adult population. According to these findings people who do sufficient physical activity are still able to fit an equivalent amount of sedentary behaviour into their lives as inactive people. Being active does not necessarily mean giving up many of the relaxing and recreational activities that people do that are not physically active. More study needs to be done of the way people who are active use their time to fit in all of these other activities, and work as well, without reducing their physical activity.

The 2004 State Physical Activity Survey contains a wealth of information, not previously collected, on the work and leisure time physical activity and sedentary activity of South Australian adults.

So what?

Sitting is a major part of our lives; on average adults do more than 50 hours of sitting a week. Can our high levels of sitting be a cause for low levels of physical activity? It appears that physically active people are able to be just as sedentary as inactive people, but just in a different way. There may be clues in the survey data to suggest ways in which inactive people can be encouraged to be more physically active by changing their sedentary behaviours. In order to address these issues, the Ministerial Physical Activity Forum and Physical Activity Council have been established. For more information go to www.beactive.com.au.

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