

Chapter One

We Are All Athletes — Minding Your Body through Everyday Life

Before we begin, I want to reassure you of something. Mark Twain once said, “Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint.” Well, trust me, this has been well edited — nothing in this book can hurt you!

Now, let’s talk about you.

Your athletic days may be largely behind you, except for an occasional game of tennis or golf. Maybe you ski once a year, maybe you bike on weekends. Whatever the case, you probably don’t think you have to sweat your physical shape that much — it’s not as though you have to train for the Olympics or even your high school football team. If you’re like most, you just want to keep your weight down and stay relatively healthy.

Staying healthy isn’t hard, in your mind, because you don’t think you’re really doing anything to your body that can hurt you. Maybe you sit and work at your computer most of the day. Or sit with your laptop on your legs and work that way. You probably use your smartphone heavily throughout the day to check on texts and emails, as well as your social media. You know, grown-up stuff.

Nothing demanding in doing any of that and nothing to worry about, right?

After all, you’re not lifting heavy boxes in a warehouse or on a loading dock. You’re not doing construction work. How in the world can you hurt yourself sitting on your butt? Or checking out your iPhone?

Well, the fact is you can hurt yourself and very easily. No matter what you do, even if it’s nothing all that active, it still affects your body in some way. And maybe in not the way you think. I’m about to tell you what can happen and it’s a lot, so you better sit down. Scratch that. You better stand up!

The Side Effects of Sitting

Just because you think you’re doing nothing doesn’t mean your body agrees.

For instance, some part of your body may have started hurting you on a regular basis. Could be your back, your neck, your hips, or another place entirely. And maybe you can’t get that part of your body to stop hurting. You ice it, get massages and try to avoid putting stress on it...and yet, it’s still bugging you constantly, despite the fact that you’re not overly active in your day-to-day life and you’re exercising regularly.

First of all, the place where it hurts you? It could be completely caused by another part of your body entirely. For example, knee pain could be the result of dysfunction or impairment at the hip, ankle or both. The term for this is “regional interdependence,” a relatively new idea conceived by therapists and rehabilitation professionals as a way to describe how one part of your body depends on the proper functioning of another part.

Second of all, our lives — and our physical health — have been transformed by technology in ways we still don’t understand completely. Our work and home environments are filled to the brim with tech

gadgets, such as computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones and even a good old-fashioned TV set or two — and our eyes are glued to the screens of those gadgets for hours every day. Our jobs depend on it and our personal lives often revolve around it.

Result? As many as a quarter of Americans engage in no leisure-time activity at all, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This creates a “kinetic chain” in our bodies that is less prepared to adapt and recover from times when we *do* engage in activity, leading to increased injury rates. (We’ll get more into detail on that chain in a later chapter).

This negative affect on our physicality directly impacts what happens to our bodies 20 years down the road. As I noted, we grow less flexible and mobile with our movements. When we do play that occasional game of tennis or golf, our motions become stiffer and more limited. A sitting position also puts huge stress on your back muscles, neck, and spine, especially if you slouch. There’s also the issue of postural decline. When you’re leaning over to look at your phone or tablet, your body does what’s called “remodeling.” It adapts to that position and locks it in as your natural state — and that can create some serious pain, because your body simply wasn’t built to be in that leaned-over position for long periods of time. For example, you’re probably sitting as you read this book — and that caused your body to automatically mold into what you feel is “normal.”

We also end up putting on weight — nobody gains 40 pounds in two weeks. You gain that much by putting on a couple month-to-month until you wake up and discover you’ve put on that 40 over time. Too much sitting can also raise your risk of heart disease, diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. None of those conditions, obviously, are good things.

Finally, there’s one more part of you that can be seriously affected — and that’s your mind. At present, sitting and staring at screens can actually boost your anxiety levels. In terms of the future, the damage can get much more serious. According to the National Institutes of Health, a lack of physical activity can boost your chances of Alzheimer's disease, dementia, and cognitive decline.

So...if you think just sitting around means you can’t get hurt, well, you should probably have another think. Because chronic pain can easily result from that lifestyle, along with all the other conditions listed above.