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Notice Your Neck While You Read This

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A February 23 New York Times article, "[Stand Up While You Read This](#)," claims that prolonged sitting--at work, in the car, in front of the TV--not only sets you up for heart disease, high blood pressure, certain cancers, diabetes, obesity, and a shorter lifespan, but also cancels out the benefits of regular exercise. This did not surprise me. I know people who work out hard and frequently, sit ten or more hours a day at work, and fail to lose weight, lower blood pressure, or reduce stress. Modern sedentary life, despite its fitness mania, does not support wellbeing. But as an Alexander Technique Teacher, I also know that *how* you sit, stand, and move, which the article completely ignores, affects your health and lifestyle choices.

The article also makes no mention of musculoskeletal problems, although back pain is the leading cause of disability in Americans under 45¹ and prevents many people from sitting, standing, or walking comfortably, as well as from exercising. According to New York neurosurgeon Jack Stern, 85% of people with chronic back pain have this problem because of how they sit, stand, and move. Many people come to me for Alexander Technique lessons because they long to exercise, go for long walks, or get back to Yoga, but chronic back or joint pain, a result of how they have engaged in these activities and/or how they sit, prevents them from doing so. Once they relearn how to sit, stand, and move, they gradually increase physical activity.

Is sitting *passive* and exercise *active* as the Times article repeatedly implies? Look at an infant or toddler sitting on the floor, perfectly poised and balanced, exploring with eyes, hands, or mouth whatever is in front of him or her. Would you call that passive? While we burn more calories, work the heart and lungs more, and strengthen certain muscles more when we run than when we sit, many people work out in what I would call a passive mode. They watch TV while on a treadmill or exercise bike or talk non-stop with their running partner on the trail. This divorce between mind and body thwarts their awareness of how they move. They overlook common habits (such as strain or collapse in the spine and faulty foot alignment) that contribute to pain and injury.

Muscles do work while we sit and our breathing-- our most basic and life-sustaining function-- is affected by how we sit. But many people use the wrong muscles (they slump or stiffen), and do not allow the right muscles to engage. These habits cause discomfort or injury while sitting and can contribute to problems in walking, exercise, Yoga, and Tai Chi. You might try diligently to sit up better, but if your idea of "right" is inaccurate, you will quickly revert to slumping and straining.

If you sit a lot with poor posture, you are not sufficiently engaging what physiologists call the red muscle fibers of your voluntary muscles. These fibers tend to work when maintaining postural tone. They fire during slow, rhythmical activity. White fibers, in contrast, are responsible for quick, powerful movement and fatigue rapidly. If you sit all day, you have to use caution when you exercise vigorously, especially if you sit or stand poorly. As you develop your white fibers at the gym, and habitually neglect your red ones, the white may usurp the red in postural support. You will then use the white fibers to sit or stand. Since they tire quickly, so will you.

The Times article and the studies it cites assume and encourage separation between your mind and body. They exclude the inter-relationships among thinking, feeling, sensing, and moving which create our habits. Current research in neurobiology (the work of Antonio Damasio and Joseph Ledoux, for example) supports what F.M. Alexander taught over a century ago, that the mind and body are an indivisible unity. Thoughts, emotions, and what Damasio calls the "sensing of the body landscape" affect one another and how we function, whether in movement or stillness. You are a unique and intricately responsive organism, not a collection of inanimate parts. And you have the potential to do all that you do with greater ease, efficiency, and wholeness.²

¹ <http://www.painfoundation.org/page.asp?file=Newsroom/PainFacts.htm>

² See www.alexandertech.org; www.stat.org.uk; *British Medical Journal*, August, 2008, "[Back Pain Study](#)."