

# Standing desks may be key to reducing obesity rates across Australia

Matilda Boseley



**Writer Elizabeth Coleman started using a standing desk five years ago after reading about dangers of remaining sedentary during the workday.**

After decades of sitting behind a desk, office workers are being encouraged to take a stand.

Standing desks, sometimes regarded as a health fad, could play a key role in finding an affordable way to reduce obesity rates across Australia.

If one in five office workers reduced their time stuck in a chair by using standing desks and scheduled walking breaks, they could reduce their chances of obesity and increase their lifespans by a collective 7492 years, or four days a year per individual, according to the results of a study from Deakin University.

The study, based on evaluation of a program trialled with Victorian public servants, estimated this could be done for a cost of just \$185.2 million in equipment and management.

Dr Lan Gao, the lead author of the evaluation, said too much sitting time was a serious health concern for the 45 per cent of Australian workers who are desk-bound.

This program was trialled as part of the "Stand Up Victoria" initiative. Funded by VicHealth and the National Health and Medical Research Council, office workers were given "sit-stand" desks and trained over three months to gradually increase standing time and movement throughout the workday.

"We operated on the message of sitting less, increasing standing, and breaking up that sitting time frequently," said Professor David Dunstan, Physical Activity Laboratory head at the Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute.

Nine months after the intervention, the study found those workers who received the standing desks and coaching sat for an average of five hours a day, an hour less than those stuck in their chairs.

The "life savings" for Australia were calculated on a potential rollout of the program to 20 per cent of all office workers.

Dr Gao estimates that \$84.2 million could be saved in healthcare costs due to the reduction of obesity-related diseases.

Elizabeth Coleman is one of those trying to increase her standing time during the workday.

As a scriptwriter, Ms Coleman found herself glued to her chair for most of her working life.

"It's such a sort of static, slothful existence physically," she said. "I could often find myself working for nine hours without moving."

"But I really took that phrase you keep hearing – 'sitting is the new smoking' – to heart."

Ms Coleman now spends half the workday at a standing desk, as well as setting reminders on her phone to get up and move every fifteen minutes.

"I definitely feel more productive. When you are sedentary all day you can feel very sluggish and it's difficult to concentrate."

A wider rollout of this program has already begun with the "Be Upstanding Initiative" from the University of Queensland, which teaches the organisation how to introduce the program. Currently, 100 organisation have signed on.

