



## GET YOUR BUTT IN GEAR

If it feels like you're sitting more than ever, it's because you probably are. And it's taking a surprising toll on your glutes...and your back, your hips, and your knees.

BY ASHLEY MATEO

**ARE YOU PARKED** at your desk right now? Slouching on your couch? Propped up on your pillows in bed? According to a study published in 2017 in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, on average, Americans spend 77 percent of their waking hours sitting or being otherwise inactive—or more than 12 hours out of a 16-hour waking day. And that was *before* many of us started working from home!

Sedentary behavior and inactivity has been on the rise in the U.S. since 2007, say researchers in the journal *Progress in Cardiovascular Diseases*. And it may get worse, with a recent Gallup poll reporting that more than 60 percent of employed adults are working from home due

to COVID-19, and many companies opting to keep up remote work in 2021, and possibly beyond.

Being sedentary has been linked to long-term health concerns like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and even premature death. But if you've been WFH for the past year, you might be experiencing something that's more immediate: dead butt syndrome.

### What Is Dead Butt Syndrome?

It sounds silly, but dead butt syndrome is a very real condition that's associated with sitting for too long. Think of it as your butt muscles developing amnesia, says Michele Olson, PhD, senior clinical professor of sport science and physical education at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama. "More specifically, it occurs when you have a weak, underused, and underdeveloped gluteus medius, the muscle that sits on the outer hip area and controls actions such as lifting your leg out to the side," she explains.

Your gluteus maximus (i.e., the meaty part of your butt) is your body's largest muscle and one of its most powerful; it helps keep you upright. The gluteus minimus and medius are smaller by comparison but super important, because they stabilize your pelvis while you're standing and walking, and control hip movement and rotation.

On a macro level, "the big cause [of dead butt syndrome] would be a lack of activation of the glute muscles," says Cathlin Fitzgerald, PT, DPT, CSCS, clinical manager at Custom Performance in New York City. If you break that down, though, the culprits could be weakness in the glute muscles, tightness in the front of the hips or your

natural anatomy (e.g., an anterior pelvic tilt)—or a combination of all three, she adds.

Here's what's going on: When you're sitting in your chair, your glutes—and the muscles from your butt to the back of your knee joint—are in an extended stretch, which means they're inactive, says Olson. "Your body is supported by that chair, so the key glute muscle to keep your body balanced is pretty much turned off."

That's because of something called reciprocal inhibition, where the muscles on one side of your hip (your glutes) are stretched and inactive while the muscles on the other side of the joint (your hip flexors) are forced into a tight and overactive position. Without loosening things up consistently, "the [hip] joint itself doesn't align ideally," explains Sabrena Jo, MS, director of science and research content at American Council on Exercise. "And you can get joint pain in the knees, back, and hips."

### Active People Aren't Immune

So you do a daily, hour-long workout? Good for you! That doesn't

exempt you from the risk of dead butt syndrome, though. In fact, if that's the only movement you do and you spend long periods of your day sitting, you're what experts call an "active couch potato."

One bout of exercise per day isn't enough to offset hours spent in inactivity. "The cardiovascular system responds best when there's some variability in the heart rate throughout the whole day," explains Jo. Your heart and blood vessels need to be taxed via regular movement.

Sitting for hours and then jumping right into a tough workout can actually put you more at risk for injury. Without your glute muscles coming into play, other muscles have to compensate for that lack of engagement—and they may not be meant to carry that much load, says Fitzgerald. You're leaving yourself open to low back pain, hamstring strains, and joint issues. To truly counteract dead butt syndrome, glute-activating and -strengthening moves should be done daily on their own, or incorporated into your regular workouts.

The more intentional you are about activating and strengthening those powerful glute muscles, the more powerful they'll be when you work out. 🍌

## 3 WAYS TO COMBAT DEAD BUTT SYNDROME

**1. Get up and move at least 5 minutes per hour.** The movement doesn't need to be vigorous or lengthy, says Jo; some jumping jacks or squats will do the trick. It's about consistency. "The more we move throughout the day, the better it is for your health," says Jo. One easy fix? Instead of sitting at your desk, start pacing while taking your calls.

**2. Practice proper posture while sitting.** That means your elbows should be bent at a 90-degree angle, your hips should be at a 90-degree angle, and your knees should be at a 90-degree angle. "Keep both feet level on the floor versus sitting cross-legged or with one hip higher than the other," says Fitzgerald—that'll keep your hips properly aligned.

**3. Stretch every day, unrelated to your workout.** "Target the front of your body—your chest, shoulders, and hips—which gets chronically shortened while sitting," says Jo. Do these two moves for at least 2 minutes (or 1 minute per leg): the Half-Kneeling Hip Stretch and the Marching Glute Bridge. Incorporate these into your day, and your butt will be good to go.

## Daily Moves for Your Booty

### TO ACTIVATE

**Marching Glute Bridge** Lie flat on back, knees bent, feet hip-width apart, heels a few inches from butt, arms at sides. Squeeze glutes to lift hips. Keep left foot on floor, lift right foot, maintaining a 90-degree bend at knee. Lower right leg, and repeat on the left side. Continue alternating, doing 12 reps.

**Grasshopper** Lie on stomach, bend knees, and bring feet together with a little separation between the knees. Squeeze your glutes to lift the legs about an inch off the floor. Lower back down. Do 10 reps.

**Side-Lying Leg Lift** Lie on right side with right arm extended on the floor, left hand in front of your body for support. Rotate the left leg so the big toe points toward the ground, then lift it up and back diagonally. Return to start. Do 10 reps, then switch to other side.

### TO STRENGTHEN

**Lateral Lunge** Stand with feet together and hands clasped in front of chest. Take a large step out to the right, immediately lowering into a lunge, sinking hips back and bending right knee to track directly in line with right foot. Keep left leg straight but not locked, with both feet pointing forward. Push off the right foot to straighten right leg, step right foot next to left, and return to starting position. Do 10 reps, then switch to the other side.

**Chair Step-Up** Stand with feet hip-width apart, arms at sides, facing the front of a chair or bench (about 20 inches high). Place right foot on the seat and drive through right foot to step onto the top of the chair or bench; bring left knee up to hip height, keeping core engaged. Very slowly lower the left leg back to the floor to return to start. Do 10 reps, then switch to the other side.

**Lateral Walk With Band** Stand with feet slightly wider than hip-width apart and a resistance band looped just above knees. Bend knees slightly and lower into a slight squat. Take 20 steps to the left, pause, then rotate the right knee in and out 10 times. Repeat in the opposite direction.

### TO STRETCH

**Half-Kneeling Hip Stretch** Start in a half-kneeling position, right foot forward and both knees bent 90 degrees. Place hands on front thigh for support. Tuck hips forward and pull belly button toward spine. Then, rock forward gently without untucking hip or rounding back. Hold for 30 seconds. Do three sets of 30-second holds per side.