

Is sitting with your legs crossed bad for you?

Movement variety matters more than posture perfection. The body tends to do well with options. The healthiest sitting position is often the one you do not hold for the next hour.

BY JOSHUA PATE

Crossing your legs belongs to that familiar pile of health warnings many of us heard as children, alongside cracking your knuckles or sitting too close to the television. But is it actually bad for you?

For most people, the answer is probably no. There is little evidence sitting with your legs crossed damages your back, wears out your hips or knees, or causes varicose veins. If anything, the bigger issue for many of us is staying in one position for too long, getting stiff or sore, and then assuming discomfort must mean something is wrong with the body.

Where did the idea come from?

For a long time, sitting “properly” was treated as a sign of discipline, self-control and good character. Once that kind of thinking takes hold, it is easy for social rules to start sounding like medical facts. It is also easy (and common) to confuse discomfort with damage. Sitting cross-legged for a while can make you feel stiff, compressed, or ready to move. But it is usually a cue to change position, not a sign that you are quietly

harming your body.

That fits with modern thinking on posture and pain, which has moved away from the idea there is one “perfect” posture.

What about your back?

Crossing your legs is often lumped into the category of “bad posture”, as if it twists the spine into trouble.

But research on posture and back pain has not found one ideal sitting position that protects everyone, or one everyday sitting posture that reliably causes harm. In one study, physiotherapists from different countries were asked to choose the “best sitting posture”. Their answers varied widely. The researchers concluded that beliefs about ideal sitting posture are shaped by tradition and professional culture as well as evidence. Posture is still relevant, but your back is strong and adaptable. It is built to tolerate a wide range of positions.

Usually, the bigger problem is being stuck in any one posture for too long, whether that is cross-legged, bolt upright, or slumped over a laptop.

What about hips and knees?



Move more, vary your position, and trust that your body is probably a lot less fragile than you were led to believe. PHOTO/FILE.

Another common claim is that crossing your legs will “wear out” your hips or knees. Again, there is little evidence that this is true. Your hips and knees cope with much larger forces when you walk upstairs, rise from a chair, run, jump, or carry shopping. Sitting cross-legged can change joint angles for a short time, but that is a long

way from showing it causes arthritis or lasting joint damage. Studies looking specifically at cross-legged sitting and long-term joint harm are limited, so the evidence is not perfect. But the evidence we have does not support the old warning.

When clinical guidelines talk about keeping hips and knees healthy, they

focus on things such as physical activity, muscle strength, healthy body weight, and managing overall joint load. They do not focus on avoiding one ordinary sitting habit.

So if crossing your legs feels comfortable, there is little reason to treat it as dangerous. If it starts to feel awkward or stiff, uncross them.

Does sitting with crossed legs cause varicose veins?

No.

Varicose veins happen when valves inside the veins do not work as well as they should, which can let blood pool and veins enlarge. Risk is linked more strongly to factors such as age, family history, pregnancy, obesity and some work patterns, including long periods of standing.

Crossing your legs may briefly change blood flow while you are in that position. But that is not the same as causing varicose veins. The evidence we have does not support crossed-leg sitting as a cause of varicose veins.

Are there times when it does matter?

Sometimes, yes, but usually for specific clinical reasons and often only for a short time. After some hip replacements, people have traditionally been told to avoid crossing their legs while tissues heal. But even here, newer research suggests some of these precautions may be more cautious than necessary for many patients, and removing them did not increase early dislocation risk in one trial.