

Fitness

Even 30 minutes of added exercise can extend life

A new study finds that physical fitness, rather than diet or general health status, is the strongest predictor of how long you'll live

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It's not that Leon Chung doesn't want to go to the gym; it's just that getting started is a challenge.

"I'd love to, but I'm intimidated by machines and the people there. They're all dressed in skin-tight clothes with their dumbbells. And I'd walk in with sweatpants all the time," she said.

She classifies her level of physical activity as "terrible."

"Once in a blue moon I'll walk on the weekends. I can count on my fingers in a year how often I go for a walk," she said.

Ms. Chung is only 55, and free of health problems, but that lack of exercise could eventually catch up with her.

Just a small amount of physical activity – a half-hour stroll a week – could reduce her risk of mortality from cardiovascular disease by half, according to a new study from Stanford University in California, published in this month's issue of *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, the journal of the American College of Sports Medicine.

Physical fitness – rather than diet or general health status – is the strongest predictor of mortality, the study suggests.

The 20-year study tested the physical fitness of 4,384 participants in their 50s and 60s who had no major health problems, using a treadmill test. Participants were asked how much exercise they did, and then divided evenly into five groups from the least fit to the most fit. Researchers followed each participant for an average of nine years, and tracked how many members of each group died during the course of the study, filtering out deaths that were likely caused by factors unrelated to physical activity, such as lung disease or cancer.

They found the group that was almost completely sedentary had a much higher risk of death than the other groups – including the one with people who exercised only a bit each week.

“You don't have to be a triathlete in the way high end of the scale,” said Jonathan Myers, one of the authors of the study. “Just get out of that least-fit group.”

The difference in physical activity between the least-fit and the second-least-fit groups was slight – not much more than an extra half-hour of walking per week, Dr. Myers said. But it turns out that 30 added minutes of exercise each week could add years to your life. Members of the least-fit group were twice as likely to die of cardiovascular disease than the second-least-fit.

“It's not like there were a lot more diabetics or a lot more smokers, or anything like that, that might explain higher mortality in [the least-fit group] – we noticed the one difference that stood out for us [the second-least-fit group] was more physically active than [the least-fit],” Dr. Myers said.

The most-fit group – who exercised roughly twice as much as the least-fit – had a mortality rate four times lower for cardiovascular disease. Ms. Chung said that while she recognizes she has bad habits when it comes to staying fit, she thinks the ship has already sailed on her health.

But Arianne Croteau, who supervises the personal trainers at Énergie Cardio fitness studios in Blainville, Que., said that it's never too late to incorporate physical activity into your life.

When people who have never exercised approach her, Ms. Croteau recommends they start with half an hour of low-intensity exercise each day. That could be walking the dog, taking a dip in a pool, or cycling – or even simpler adjustments to your daily routine.

“If [people] get off the bus two or three stops before their [actual stop], they could walk 10 minutes,” she said. “They can start with 10 minutes, and if they do that three times each day they're already in better health than if they do nothing.”

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