



## **Physical activity and heart disease**

Exercise of any sort has been repeatedly shown to protect against developing heart disease. Those who are inactive are twice as likely to develop heart disease and die young than those who are active.

Forty years ago it was thought that the key to protection was fitness. The more one exercised, the better – "no gain without pain". High intensity exercise was recommended for all. This led to a gymnasium based fitness industry. Exercise equipment, clothing and footwear became big business. Marketing campaigns showed smiling, splendid people showing off their admirable bodies. What was the reality?

*"The exercise now recommended can be fitted into your day...Just walk at lunchtime, during travel to or from work, before or after work, during leisure time, alone or with others, at weekends."*

High intensity exercise (with some shortness of breath, sweating and high heart rates) led many to be injured if they exercised on consecutive days or if exercise extended beyond 30 minutes on any one occasion. Most of the injuries were to the legs or back. Most injuries were in older or overweight persons. Thus, it was recommended that exercise should be continuous for not more than 30 minutes and only on alternate days. The week has seven days so it was suggested that this exercise should be undertaken three to four times per week.

About 20 years ago, studies started to show that protection against heart disease and death could be almost equally achieved by moderate exercise (by just getting up and doing things or by walking). This has since been demonstrated repeatedly.

For the past 10 years, most authoritative bodies have recommended half an hour of walking or its equivalent on most, preferably all, days of the week. The word "brisk" is inserted but has not been defined. For practical purposes "brisk" means enough to make you aware of your breathing, but able to talk easily, without puffing and not sweating. This level of exercise is comfortable and unlikely to cause injury. Further, it has been shown that the 30 minutes of activity can be broken down into smaller segments. Thus, the exercise now recommended can be fitted into your day.

There is no need for special clothing, no need for sporting gear, no need for monitoring, no need for medical clearances, no need for gymnasium enrolment and no need for fitness trainers. Just walk at lunchtime, during travel to or from work, before or after work, during leisure time, alone or with others, at weekends. Gardening, housework, dancing and some hobbies are alternatives to walking. So are swimming and cycling if you prefer them. Golf is punctuated walking.

We know that being active helps to lower weight, blood pressure and cholesterol levels. It helps to improve mood and well being. Maybe it does more than these things. We really do not yet know why even mild or moderate activities are so valuable. Being active may help to prevent blood clotting and may produce other potentially beneficial changes.

For those of you who are athletic and lean, who are already highly active, keep it up. The chance of injury for you is small. There are indeed added benefits from being highly active and fit.

However, for most of us, in our sedentary, overeating, overweight society, some regular daily activity is enough to obtain most of the health benefits:

- less premature heart disease
- longer life expectancy
- retention of function into old age
- a sense of well being.

The evidence is that the same benefit applies to both men and women. Try it: it's easy.

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