

Try the No-Sweat Solution to Better Health

Even moderate physical activity brings big rewards, experts say.

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MONDAY, June 12 (HealthDay News) -- For millions of overweight, couch-bound Americans, the word "exercise" conjures up visions of hectic aerobics classes, marathon running or hours-long workouts at the gym.

It's all a bit daunting.

But new research is beginning to change that view. Study after study is showing that small amounts of physical activity -- even walking the dog -- can boost health in unexpected ways.

"For some people, it's as simple as parking their car on the far side of the parking lot and walking, or taking the stairs instead of the elevator. But the more you do, the better," said Dr. Gerald Fletcher, a cardiologist at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Fla., and a spokesman for the American Heart Association.

More and more, fitness experts and physicians are discovering that exercise, like medicine, works on a dose-response basis -- even a little is good, moderate amounts are better, and vigorous exercise provides even more rewards.

Some evidence from the recent literature:

- A Duke University study of 133 overweight people found that a moderate fitness regimen involving a brisk one- to two-mile walk, four or five days a week, offered big improvements in cardiovascular health;
- A similar study, this time from the University of Florida, Gainesville, found that walking just a half-hour a day for five or more days a week greatly boosted the heart health of middle-aged "couch potatoes";
- In a Seattle study, an hour per week spent gardening cut cardiac arrest risk by 66 percent; an hour per week spent walking slashed that risk by 73 percent;
- People suffering from the painful condition peripheral arterial disease (PAD) also reaped real benefits from walking just three times a week, a Northwestern University study found;
- And a University of Missouri-Columbia study found that even our four-legged friends can help: Researchers found that overweight individuals who walked their dogs each day dropped an average of 14 pounds over the course of a year -- beating the results of most weight-loss plans.

Fletcher said it's important to get into a good exercise routine, preferably engaging in physical activity at the same time of day, each day. "Also, if you try and exercise two or three times a week, but then take a few days off, that's not as good as doing something most days," he said.

If walking a mile or two seems tough to visualize, he recommends driving it first in your car -- watching the odometer to see just how far a distance it is from your home. "Then, walk to that point each day," he said. Often, a little bit of exercise feels so good it gradually turns into a little bit more, he said.

"You can get more vigorous as you go," Fletcher added. "We consider (walking) a 20-minute mile 'moderate' exercise. Walking or running that mile in 15 minutes gets into the area of 'vigorous exercise.'"

Besides helping to shed pounds and bring a healthy elasticity to your step (and arteries), exercise can help clear the mind, too.

"What the studies are showing is that exercise, at least when performed in a group setting, seems to be at least as effective as standard antidepressants in reducing symptoms in patients with major depression," researcher James Blumenthal, a professor of medical psychology at Duke University in Durham, N.C., told *HealthDay*.

Right now, just sitting on the sofa for long stretches is probably giving millions of Americans the blues, Fletcher pointed out. "Only about 25 percent of us exercise properly, and about 20 percent do absolutely nothing. The rest are in the middle -- sometimes they do it, sometimes they don't."

Before beginning any exercise routine, it's important to check with your doctor, particularly if you have a history of health problems. Then, once you get clearance, get moving.

The key, Fletcher said, is to start your physical-activity routine with small steps -- literally.

"Walk a little, bike," he said. "Remember, anything you do is better than nothing at all."

More information

Learn more about the benefits of exercise at the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

(SOURCES: Gerald Fletcher, M.D., cardiologist, Mayo Clinic, Jacksonville, Fla., and spokesman, American Heart Association; James Blumenthal, Ph.D., professor, medical psychology, Duke University, Durham, N.C.)

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