

To Stay Trim, Women Need an Hour of Exercise Daily

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March 23, 2010

MedPage Today Action Points

- Explain that women who exercised fewer than 420 minutes per week gained significantly more weight than those who met this target, which suggests 60 minutes of physical activity a day may be needed to prevent weight gain.

Review

Normal-weight women need 60 minutes a day of moderate exercise in order to maintain a healthy weight, researchers said.

Those who exercised fewer than 420 minutes a week gained significantly more weight than those who met this target, I-Min Lee, MBBS, ScD, of Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston, and colleagues reported in the March 24/31 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

For the heaviest women, however, there was no relationship between exercise and weight gain.

"If you want to prevent your weight gain over time, you need to be physically active at the level of 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity, so the equivalent of one hour a day of brisk walking or 30 minutes a day of jogging or running," Lee said, adding that for heavier women, it's a "case of 'too late,' if you will -- for a woman who has a body mass index of 25 or higher, there was no relation between physical activity and weight change."

Federal guidelines have recommended at least 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity exercise in order to gain substantial health benefits, but it remains unclear whether that amount can also prevent weight gain.

So the researchers assessed data from the 34,079 women in the Women's Health Study from 1992 to 2007. Their mean age was 54 and they were all healthy at baseline.

Over a mean follow-up of 13 years, the women gained a mean of 2.6 kg (5.7 lbs).

The researchers found that those who exercised the most -- 420 minutes or more a week -- gained significantly less weight than those who exercised less than 420 minutes per week ($P=0.003$).

Compared with the most active group, those who exercised the least gained an additional 0.12 kg over a three-year period, and those who exercised between 150 and 420 minutes per week gained an additional 0.11 kg over that time, Lee said.

There was no significant difference between the two latter groups.

They also found that women getting more than 420 minutes of exercise per week were significantly less likely to gain 2.3 kg (5.1 lbs) over a three-year period.

In adjusted analyses, those in the group that got the least exercise were 11% more likely to gain that amount of weight, and those expending between 150 and 420 minutes per week were 7% more likely to do so.

"These two lesser-activity groups of women were significantly more likely to gain weight compared with the most active group of women," Lee said.

The researchers also found that physical activity was inversely related to weight gain, but only among women with a body mass index (BMI) under 25. For those with a BMI greater than that, exercise had no effect on weight control.

"[For] the women who were overweight or obese, physical activity -- with the range done in the study -- was not sufficient to control their weight," Lee said.

Finally, the researchers investigated how much physical activity was done by women who successfully maintained normal weight.

A total of 13.3% of the cohort had done so by gaining less than 2.3 kg (5.07 lbs) over the 13-year study period.

The mean activity level among this group was 21.5 "metabolic equivalent" hours per week, or just over 60 minutes a day of moderate-intensity exercise.

The researchers said the results "highlight two important points for weight gain prevention."

First, once patients are overweight, they said, it may be too late for physical activity to have any effects. Second, sustaining high levels of exercise is needed to maintain a normal BMI.

Still, Lee cautioned not to "lose sight of the fact that any amount of physical activity, even 150 minutes a week, is sufficient to lower the risk of developing many chronic diseases."

They noted that the study was limited by self-report of recreational physical activity and body weight.

However, their findings suggest that the "2008 federal recommendation for 150 minutes per week, while clearly sufficient to lower the risks of chronic diseases, is insufficient for weight gain prevention absent caloric restriction."

The study was supported by grants from the National Institutes of Health.

Lee reported serving as a consultant to Virgin HealthMiles and sits on its scientific advisory board.

The other authors reported no disclosures.

Primary source: Journal of the American Medical Association

Source reference:

Lee IM, et al "Physical activity and weight gain prevention" *JAMA* 2010; 303(12): 1173-79.

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