



Nutrition for Family Living

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December, 2003 Topics

Physical activity is key to women's health
New possible links between diet and cancer
Dietary supplement and food labeling update

Physical activity is key to women's health

A number of recent studies from well-respected researchers have a common message that's important for women: moderate physical activity is key to managing weight, reducing the risk of breast cancer and heart disease, and living a longer life.

Breast cancer. Researchers at a number of universities around the country followed a group of 74,000 women ages 50-79 for almost five years. They found that women who walked briskly for just an hour and fifteen minutes to 2-1/2 hours a week – or biked, swam, or danced for a similar amount of time – were 18% less likely to develop breast cancer during the period of the study than women who were less active.

That amount of activity works out to be 30 minutes 3-5 times per week. Women who were more active decreased their risk even further, but the greatest benefit was for women who went from being sedentary to being moderately active. This is the first study to show that becoming active later in life can still have a protective effect on cancer risk. **In other words, it's never too late to increase your activity.**

Weight management. It's not news that physical activity helps with weight management. In a different study, researchers looked at the role exercise intensity plays in losing weight. They followed 184 obese women for 12 months while they participated in a weight loss program that included both reduced calories and physical activity of varying intensities. They found that the number of minutes the women exercised made more difference in the amount of weight they lost than the intensity of their physical activity. This fits with what the National Weight Control Registry has observed, which is that the people who are able to lose at least 30 pounds and keep it off for a least a year are those who walk every day. **Daily walking helps keep weight off.**

Life expectancy. Heart disease is the number one killer of women. Two new studies show that physical fitness is an even more important predictor of death for women than it is for men. In one study, physical fitness was so strongly correlated with the risk of death that even a sedentary woman who didn't smoke, had good cholesterol levels, and didn't have high blood pressure still had 13 times the risk of dying of heart disease as a very active woman with the same desirable cholesterol and blood pressure. They also found that fitness can be improved significantly with just several months of moderate physical activity. **So even people who have been inactive for most of their lives can decrease their chances of dying prematurely of heart disease by walking for at least 30 minutes most days of the week.**



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Implications for educators: Knowledge of health benefits alone is usually not enough to motivate people to be more active. But when someone is contemplating behavior change, short term health benefits, such as weight control, may get them to take action. Educators can use the three take-home messages (in bold) to encourage people, particularly women, that physical activity is worth the effort.

For a summary of current US data on prevalence of physical activity, see the October, 2003 Nutrition for Family Living, <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/p3/mmpdfs/0310.pdf>. For a summary of US walking trends, see the July, 2003 NutriNet News <http://www.nutrisci.wisc.edu/nutrinet/newsletters/Jul03news.pdf>.

Note to Women: Thinner, Healthier, and Longer Life Within Easy Reach. Tufts University Health & Nutrition Letter, November 2003.

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