

Over 40? Just 20 minutes of daily exercise can keep you out of the hospital

February 20 2023, by Lori Solomon



If you're over 40, regular exercise may not only keep you fit—it might

keep you out of the hospital, too, a large new study suggests.

Researchers found that among nearly 82,000 British adults, those who regularly exercised were less likely to be hospitalized for various health conditions in the coming years. The list included such common ills as pneumonia, stroke, diabetes complications and severe urinary tract infections.

The findings suggest that if middle-aged and older people added just 20 minutes of exercise to their daily routine, they could cut the risk of those hospitalizations by anywhere from 4% to 23% over seven years.

Experts said the study expands on what people typically see as the benefits of exercise—like a trimmer body, improved fitness and healthier heart.

"It could also help keep you out of the hospital. And that matters to people," said Peter Katzmarzyk, a professor at Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, La.

Katzmarzyk, who was not involved in the study, said it aligns with what's generally recommended to Americans to improve their health: Get at least 150 minutes of moderate "cardio" exercise, or 75 minutes at a vigorous intensity, each week. That means exercise that gets the heart pumping and works up a sweat: Moderate-intensity includes things like brisk walking, biking on level ground or yard work. Running, biking on hills or swimming laps count as vigorous intensity.

The findings, published Feb. 16 in *JAMA Network Open*, are based on data from a large ongoing research project called the UK Biobank.

Researchers focused on nearly 82,000 participants between the ages of 42 and 78 who spent a week wearing wrist monitors that recorded their

physical activity. They looked at the relationship between those activity levels and participants' odds of being hospitalized in the coming years.

After roughly seven years, more than 48,000 study participants did end up in the hospital, for a host of reasons. When it came to nine of those health issues, though, people who were more physically active had lower risks.

The big nine were gallbladder disease, UTIs, blood clots, stroke, diabetes complications, pneumonia, iron-deficiency anemia, colon polyps and diverticular disease (where small "pouches" form in the wall of the colon).

The findings do not prove that physical activity, per se, was responsible, said lead researcher Eleanor Watts of the U.S. National Cancer Institute in Rockville, Md.

For one, people who are younger, or in better health, or have higher incomes and more resources may be more likely to exercise—and less likely to land in the hospital.

But, Watts said, when her team factored in those differences, physical activity was still linked to a protective effect.

Plus, she noted, it's known that exercise has plenty of benefits that could help prevent those hospitalizations.

"Studies show that physical activity can improve immune function, lung and heart health, insulin sensitivity and reduce inflammation," Watts said. "Physical activity also can reduce body fat, high blood pressure and cholesterol."

The researchers estimate that it takes only an extra 20 minutes of

moderate-to-vigorous cardio each day to curb the odds of being hospitalized for the nine conditions the study identified. That ranged from a 4% dip in the risk of hospitalization for colon polyps to a 23% drop in the chances of landing in the hospital due to diabetes.

Dr. Chip Lavie is medical director of cardiac rehabilitation and prevention at John Ochsner Heart and Vascular Institute in New Orleans.

"Moderate-to-vigorous" is a fairly broad range, and Lavie said that a daily jog may bring bigger benefits than walking your dog. Plus, the amount of exercise a person needs varies with the ultimate goal: If you want to lose weight, he noted, the more calories you burn, the better.

But the main message, Lavie said, is that "almost any physical activity is better than inactivity."

That's good news, the experts said, for people of all ages and fitness levels: You do not have to start a running routine to improve your health.

And even if you've been sedentary for years, Watts said, it's never "too late" to get moving.

More information: Eleanor L. Watts et al, Association of Accelerometer-Measured Physical Activity Level With Risks of Hospitalization for 25 Common Health Conditions in UK Adults, *JAMA Network Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.56186](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.56186)

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Citation: Over 40? Just 20 minutes of daily exercise can keep you out of the hospital (2023,

February 20) retrieved 18 April 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-02-physical-hospitalizations-common-conditions.html>

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