Doing more exercise than is recommended can lower disease risk, experts say

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THE minimum recommended amount of exercise should be increased, researchers have said after a new study found that more exercise can drastically lower a person's risk of five serious diseases.

Exceeding the current recommended minimum levels of exercise each week can significantly reduce the risk of breast and bowel cancer, diabetes, heart disease and stroke, experts found.

At present, the World Health Organisation recommends that people conduct at least "600 metabolic equivalent minutes (Met minutes)" of physical activity - the equivalent of 150 minutes each week of brisk walking or 75 minutes per week of running.

Researchers from the US and Australia looked into how much exceeding these levels can reduce the risk of the five common chronic diseases.

Their study, published in the British Medical Journal, examined 174 studies published between 1980 and 2016 which looked at the associations between total physical activity and at least one of the diseases.

Having higher levels of physical activity was significantly associated with a reduced risk in the diseases.

The study found two phased reductions in the risk of the five conditions - quick drops in the risk from 600 to 4,000 Met minutes of physical activity per week followed by slow but steady reductions from 4,000 to 10,000 Met minutes each week.

Most health gains occurred when people conducted 3,000 to 4,000 Met minutes per week, they found.

The authors said that 3000 MET minutes each week can be achieved by climbing the stairs for 10 minutes, vacuuming for 15 minutes, gardening for 20 minutes, running for 20 minutes, and walking or cycling for transportation 25 minutes on a daily basis.

"The findings of this study showed that a higher level of total physical activity is strongly associated with a lower risk of breast cancer, colon cancer, diabetes, ischemic heart disease, and ischemic stroke, with most health gains occurring at a total activity level of 3000-4000 MET minutes/week," the authors wrote.

"Results suggest that total physical activity needs to be several times higher than the recommended minimum level of 600 MET minutes/week for larger reductions in the risk of these diseases.

"With population ageing, and an increasing number of cardiovascular and diabetes deaths since 1990, greater attention and investments in interventions to promote physical activity in the general public is required."

Commenting on the study, June Davison, a senior cardiac nurse at the British Heart Foundation, said: "In the UK, it's recommended that adults are active every day and do at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week.

"But this study suggests even higher levels of physical activity would significantly lower the risk of developing a number of diseases, including heart and circulatory disease and breast cancer.

"We already know that there are additional health benefits with doing more than 150 minutes but in the UK only two in five adults achieve this minimum recommendation.

"When setting guidelines, they need to be a realistic target of what people are able to achieve.

"Therefore the first step is to increase the number of people achieving 150 minutes of exercise a week and hopefully Rio 2016 will inspire many of us to take up a sport.

"Being physically active not only reduces our risk of heart disease and other conditions, including cancer, but can also improve our mental health and wellbeing."