Active Young Adults More Likely to Be Slimmer in Middle Age

Clinical Psychiatry News

February 2011

Section: Pg. 47; Vol. 39; No. 2; ISSN: 0270-6644

Length: 558 words

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Body

Maintaining a high level of physical activity throughout young adulthood curbed both the weight gain and the expanding waistline characteristic of middle age, according to Dr. Arlene L. Hankinson of the department of preventive medicine at Northwestern University, Chicago, and her associates.

That finding, from a longitudinal study that tracked men and women during the 20-year transition from young adulthood to middle age, "highlights the value of incorporating and maintaining at least 30 minutes of activity into daily life," the investigators said.

The investigators undertook their study because public health guidelines recommending regular exercise have been "largely based on cross-sectional observational and short-term clinical evidence that cannot account for the changing risk of weight gain with increasing age," the investigators noted.

Moreover, it had never been shown that federal guidelines advocating 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous daily activity are sufficient to prevent weight gain during the transition to middle age, "when the highest risk of weight gain occurs," they wrote (JAMA 2010;304:2603-10).

Dr. Hankinson and her colleagues examined data for 3,554 subjects who were 18-30 years of age at baseline in 1985-1986 regarding self-reported participation in 13 specific sports, exercise, home maintenance, and occupational activities.

At all activity levels, men and women alike showed gains in weight, body mass index, and waist circumference during 20 years of follow-up. "Some age-related weight gain may be unavoidable in our society, as it has been observed even among a population of vigorously active runners through middle age," the researchers noted.

However, habitual daily vigorous activity was associated with smaller increases in mean weight, BMI, and waist circumference, compared with moderate, inconsistent, or low activity.

Men with high activity levels gained 2.6 fewer kilograms, and women with high activity levels gained 6.1 fewer kilograms per year than did men and women with low activity levels. Similarly, men with high activity levels gained 3.1 fewer centimeters and women with high activity levels gained 3.8 fewer centimeters in waist circumference per year.

However, only a small proportion of study subjects (11% of men and 12% of women) maintained that high level of vigorous activity over 20 years.

Approximately 37% of the study cohort participated in regular activity equivalent to the levels recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. At that level of activity, men gained 1.8 fewer kilograms and women gained 4.7 fewer kilograms during follow-up than did study subjects who had lower levels of activity.

BOX STORIES

Vitals

Major Finding: Men with high activity levels in young adulthood gained 2.6 fewer kilograms and 3.1 fewer centimeters in waist circumference per year than did men with low activity levels; women with high activity levels gained 6.1 fewer kilograms and 3.8 fewer centimeters in waist circumference per year than did women with low activity levels.

Data Source: Secondary analysis of data on 3,554 subjects in the ***Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults*** (CARDIA) multicenter, longitudinal (20-year), cohort study.

Disclosures: The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute supported the study. No financial conflicts of interest were reported.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: CPNEWS

Subject: EXERCISE & FITNESS (91%); ADULTS (90%); INVESTIGATIONS (90%); PREVENTION & WELLNESS (90%); MEDICAL RESEARCH (78%); PUBLIC HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (77%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (77%); PUBLIC HEALTH (73%); RESEARCH REPORTS (72%); RUNNING (70%); Across Specialties (%)

Industry: HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (77%)

Load-Date: February 15, 2011

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