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Physical Activity and Mortality in 50-Year-Old Men

Boosting physical activity has the same long-term effect on mortality as does smoking cessation.

Does increasing physical activity in middle age lead to longer life? In this prospective population-based study, Swedish investigators examined the effects of changes in physical activity and of smoking cessation among 2205 men (age, 50 at study enrollment in 1970–1973).

After 35 years of follow-up, absolute mortality rates for men with low (sedentary), medium, and high (≥ 3 hours of active recreational sports or heavy gardening weekly) levels of physical activity were 27.1, 23.6, and 18.4 per 1000 person-years, respectively. During the first 10 years of follow-up, men who boosted their physical activity from low or medium levels to high levels exhibited significantly higher mortality than did men who sustained high baseline levels of physical activity (hazard ratio, 1.70). However, after 10 years of follow-up, men who increased their physical activity to high levels showed the same mortality rate as men who sustained high levels of activity. Furthermore, mortality was halved in sedentary men who increased their physical activity to high levels compared with rates in men who remained sedentary (HR, 0.51). Similar results were found for men who increased their physical activity from medium to high levels. These rate reductions were comparable to those observed with smoking cessation (HR, 0.64).

Comment: Middle-aged men who begin exercise programs might achieve a mortality benefit. This benefit, which seems to occur after years of sustaining high levels of physical activity, is similar to that of smoking cessation.

— [Paul S. Mueller, MD, MPH, FACP](#)

Published in Journal Watch General Medicine April 7, 2009

Citation(s):

Byberg L et al. Total mortality after changes in leisure time physical activity in 50 year old men: 35 year follow-up of population based cohort. *BMJ* 2009 Mar 5; 338:b688.