

Intensity of Physical Activity and Risk of Coronary Heart Disease

To the Editor: Dr Lee and colleagues found that at least 1 hour of recreational walking per week was associated with lower rates of coronary heart disease (CHD) in healthy female professionals aged 45 years and older who participated in no other vigorous activity.¹ We are concerned that health professionals and the public could easily misinterpret the appealing take-home message of Lee et al that "no pain, no gain is passé" and assume that 1 h/wk of any walking is sufficient for reducing the risk of chronic disease. Because the cardiovascular benefits reported in the study by Lee et al occurred in minimally active women compared with women who do no activity at all, such benefits cannot be generalized to the population as a whole.

We are especially concerned because the majority of US adults report they already walk at least 1 h/wk. During 1999-2000, we used a national random-digit dial survey to ask 7529 adults aged 18 years and older, "In a usual week, do you walk for at least 10 minutes at a time while at work, for recreation, exercise, to get to and from places or for any other reason?" Sixty-nine percent of both male and female respondents reported walking at least 60 min/wk (95% confidence interval, 67.8%-70.4%). Based on the main finding in the study by Lee et al, these respondents might erroneously conclude that there is little additional benefit to be obtained from further increasing their activity level.

The rapidly increasing rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes mellitus are testimony to the inadequacy of physical activity levels among US adults.^{2,3} As noted by Lee et al, 1 h/wk of walking falls far short of national guidelines, which recommend that adults should accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity level of activity (equivalent to brisk walking) on most, and preferably all, days of the week.⁴ Even this activity level is the minimum recommended, and persons who already meet it "are likely to derive some additional health and fitness benefits from becoming more physically active."⁴

The message that even small increases in activity can result in demonstrable health benefits certainly should be promoted to the sedentary population, and walking 1 h/wk is a great beginning toward meeting national guidelines. Encouraging the sedentary population to get moving is critical, but in doing so we must not inadvertently discourage the vast majority of adults who are already minimally active from making further progress.

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