

Being Active for 20 Minutes a Day Can Help You Stay Heart Healthy

- A new study finds that 20 minutes of daily moderate to vigorous exercise in early older age (70 to 75 years) may best stave off major heart disease, including heart failure, in later older age (80 years and older).
- Maintaining an active lifestyle over time was associated with lower risks of cardiovascular disease and death in both men and women participants.
- Moderate physical activity included walking and fishing, while vigorous physical activity included gardening, gym workouts, cycling, dancing, and swimming.

Twenty minutes of exercise a day may help keep the doctor away, especially when it comes to heart health, according to a new study. The [study](#), published Feb. 14 in the journal *Heart*, found that 20 minutes of daily moderate to vigorous exercise in early older age (70 to 75 years) may best stave off major heart disease, including heart failure, in later older age (80 years and older).

It's not news that exercise is good for heart health and prolonging a healthy life. But what the findings reinforce is that even small actions can make a big difference for overall health.

Exercise and heart health

While experts have found that [exercise leads to better heart health](#)^{Trusted Source}, few studies have narrowed in on specifically whether exercise later in life can help prevent heart disease in older age. For this new study, researchers looked at data from the Progetto Veneto Anziani, a study involving 3,099 Italians ages 65 or older.

Blood tests were carried out between 1995 and 1997, with two more assessments 4 and 7 years later. The health of the participants was tracked until 2018. What the study found was that increasing levels of physical activity, as well as maintaining an active lifestyle over time, were associated with lower risks of cardiovascular disease and death in both men and women participants.

"This study reinforces what we know about the importance of incorporating physical activity into daily life," said [Dr. Rachel-Maria Brown Talaska](#), director of inpatient cardiac services at Lenox Hill Hospital.

“Any activity is better than none. And, starting later in life is better than never starting an exercise regimen. Older patients should not feel age is a limiting factor when maintaining or initiating a fitness plan,” she said.

Most of the study participants demonstrated active physical activity patterns over time, which were associated with a 52 percent lower risk of cardiovascular disease among men, compared with participants with stable-low patterns.

The strongest associations were observed among men in this study, but the researchers note that women who did more physical activity also had consistently lower incidence rates of almost all cardiovascular outcomes.

How to incorporate physical activity later in life

For the purposes of the study, researchers had participants fill out questionnaires on their physical activity levels at each of the time points. Moderate physical activity included walking and fishing, while vigorous physical activity included gardening, gym workouts, cycling, dancing, and swimming. Participants who had at least 20 minutes of daily physical activity were considered active. Those with less physical activity were defined as inactive.

“Moderate intensity activity should increase your heart rate and you will breathe harder than at rest, but you will still be able to hold a conversation,” said Brown Talaska. “Vigorous intensity activity should also increase heart rate and breathing rate. You will begin to sweat, and it will be difficult to speak full sentences. This is a good gauge of your level of intensity.”

For the average person, moderate exercise that older adults can incorporate into their lifestyle can include water aerobics, ballroom dancing, gardening, brisk walking, or flat-road biking. Vigorous exercise for older adults may include swimming laps, running, aerobic dance classes, uphill hiking, and singles tennis.

Overall, the study concluded that 20 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day is recommended to maximize cardiovascular benefits. But before beginning a new exercise routine, Brown Talaska recommends talking with your doctor.