- Women—physical fitness

Exercise yields greater benefits for women than men

Physical activity cuts death risk for both sexes, but women get bigger payoff with less effort

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Women who exercise regularly have a much lower risk of premature death or a fatal cardiovascular event than men who work out the same length of time, a new study indicates.

The findings, supported by the National Institutes of Health, were published Monday in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology. The results are based on a data analysis of more than 400,000 U.S. adults ages 27 to 61.

Over two decades, women who exercised regularly were 24 percent less likely than those who didn't work out to experience death from any cause, while men were 15 percent less likely. Women also had a 36 percent reduced risk for a fatal heart attack, stroke or other cardiovascular event, while men had a 14 percent decreased risk.

Researchers noted that women on average tend to exercise less than men, and said that hopefully, these findings will motivate more women to incorporate greater movement into their lives.

"The good news is that for women — they do seem to get more out of every minute of exercise when compared to men," the study's co-lead author, Dr. Martha Gulati, told UPI via email.

But telling a never-exerciser to strive toward about 30 minutes a day "can sound overwhelming and impossible, so they will resign and
not even start any activity," said Gulati, director of preventive cardiology in the Smidt Heart Institute at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles.

She suggested that men and women begin with five minutes a day and then increase the time.

The link for greater reduced risks for mortality among women compared to men held true for all forms of exercise — moderate aerobic activity, such as brisk walking; vigorous exercise, such as taking a spinning class or jumping rope; and strength training, which could
include body-weight exercises.

Yet, for moderate aerobic physical activity, the decreased risk for death plateaued for both men and women at 300 minutes, or five hours, per week. At this degree of activity, women and men lowered their risk of an early death by 24 percent and 18 percent respectively.

Similar trends existed with 110 minutes of weekly vigorous aerobic exercise, which correlated with a 24 percent reduced risk of death for women and a 19 percent decreased risk for men.

Women also reaped the same rewards as men, but in less time. With moderate aerobic exercise, they reached the 18 percent reduced risk point in half as much time as men: 140 minutes, or under 2.5 hours, per week, compared to 300 minutes for men.

For vigorous aerobic exercise, women met the 19 percent reduced risk mark with only 57 minutes a week, compared to 110 minutes for men.

This benefit extended to weekly strength training exercises. Women and men who engaged in strengthbased exercises saw a 19 percent and 11 percent decreased risk for death, respectively, compared to those who did not take part in these exercises.

Women who pursued strength training had an even more substantially lower risk of cardiovascular-related deaths — a 30 percent reduced risk, compared to 11 percent for men.

Despite all these benefits, only 33 percent of women and 43 percent of men in the study met the standard for weekly aerobic exercise, while 20 percent of women and 28 percent of men completed a weekly strength training session.

Multiple factors, including variations in anatomy and physiology, may explain the differences in outcomes between the sexes, the researchers said.

For example, men often have greater lung capacity, larger hearts, more lean-body mass and a more significant proportion of fast-twitch muscle fibers compared to women. As a result, women may use added respiratory, metabolic and strength demands to do the same movement, and in turn achieve more health benefits.

"It is important to study women and to look for sex differences," Gulati said. "Women are not simply small men. They are physiologically different."

Adults should aim for at least 2 1/2 to five hours of moderate-intensity exercise or 1 1/4 to 2 1/2 hours of vigorous exercise weekly, or a combination of both, and participate in strength-based activities two or more days per week, according to The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.