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Why short bursts of activity can work wonders

IMPROVE YOUR HEART HEALTH WITH JUST FOUR MINUTES OF VIGOROUS EXERCISE... EVEN PLAYING WITH THE KIDS COUNTS. LISA SALMON

Paisley Daily Express · 16 Dec 2024 · 14



IF you thought doing enough exercise to benefit your heart meant serious commitment, think again – new research suggests just four daily minutes of ‘incidental’ physical activity can cut heart attack risk by half.

The University of Sydney study found just one-and-a-half minutes to four minutes of daily vigorous physical activity like climbing stairs, completed in short bursts of up to a minute, improved cardiovascular health in middle-aged women who did no structured exercise.

The study, which used UK Biobank data from 22,368 men and women aged 40-79 who didn’t do regular structured exercise, found those who simply did tiny bursts of high-intensity physical activity as part of their daily routine – known as vigorous intermittent lifestyle physical activity (VILPA) – had a much lower risk of major cardiovascular events.

However, it was only women, not men, who reaped significant benefits from such activity.

“Making short bursts of vigorous physical activity a lifestyle habit could be a promising option for women who are not keen on structured exercise or are unable to do it for any reason,” says study lead author Emmanuel Stamatakis, a professor of physical activity and population health at the University of Sydney.

Women who averaged 3.4 minutes of VILPA daily were 45% less likely to experience a major cardiovascular event. They were also 51% less likely to have a heart attack and 67% less likely to develop heart failure than women who did no VILPA.

Just 1.2 to 1.6 minutes of VILPA per day was associated with a 30% lower risk of major cardiovascular events, a 33% lower risk of heart attack, and a 40% lower risk of heart failure.

However, men who averaged 5.6 minutes of daily VILPA were only 16% less likely to experience a major cardiovascular event than men who did none.

A minimum of
2.3 minutes per

BY

day was associated with only an 11% risk reduction.

Emmanuel says it’s hard to tell why the heart health benefits of short bursts of physical activity were much stronger for women, although it may be because women exerted themselves over 20% more than men during VILPA bouts.

“The sex differences we found may reflect this increased effort women put into any given vigorous task,” he observes.

WHAT COUNTS AS VIGOROUS INTERMITTENT LIFESTYLE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

Emmanuel says VILPA might include gardening “with more vigour”, fast walking with a backpack, walking uphill, brief power walking sprints, energetic playing with kids or pets, and stair climbing. He explains: “A key principle is the increase in the intensity of an otherwise light or moderate intensity activity for at least 10–20 seconds or longer, to the point that you start feeling out of breath and your heart rate is accelerating.” Activities like stair climbing, for example, will reach vigorous intensity for most middle-aged and older people, even when they’re done at a regular pace, he says.

Although the amount of potentially beneficial vigorous activity for women is way lower than current official UK exercise recommendations of at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity a week or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity a week, Emmanuel points out the benefits seen in the study were in women who did short bursts of VILPA almost daily, several times a day, with an

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Dr Oliver Guttman

average of nine to 10 brief bouts.

“Turning such behaviour into habit wouldn’t necessarily be easy,” he stresses, although he says the fact the benefits came from incidental physical activities means they may be easier for many people to incorporate into their daily routines.

“Even a little bit of higher intensity activity might help improve long-term cardiovascular health, and might be just the thing to help some people develop a regular physical activity, or even structured exercise, habit in the long-term,” he says.

“But we should not be fooled into thinking that small amounts of VILPA are a quick fix of a complex problem, ie. the pandemic of physical inactivity that leads to shorter and healthier lives.”

Dr Oliver Guttman, a consultant cardiologist at The Wellington Hospital, part of HCA Healthcare UK, says the study offers “promising insights”, and suggests activities like taking the stairs instead of the lift, power walking during lunch breaks, carrying shopping “in a way with more energy”, or playing actively with children or pets can make a meaningful difference.

“We don’t necessarily see these as exercise, rather lifestyle modifications that are already part of our daily routines,” he says.

“The key takeaway is that even short, intense bursts of daily activity can reduce heart disease risk.” And he stresses that while the cardiovascular benefits of short vigorous bursts of activity were less pronounced in men, “it doesn’t mean they should ignore the principle”.

He says: “Men can similarly look for opportunities to add short bursts of vigorous activity – perhaps taking the stairs more often, doing quick power walks, or adding some intensity to household chores.”

“The beauty of this approach is its accessibility,” says Dr Guttman. “You don’t need a gym membership or expensive equipment – it’s about making your existing daily activities a bit more dynamic and intentional. Start with just a minute or two of higher-intensity movement, and gradually make it a habit.

“Every bit of increased physical intensity can contribute to better health.”