

Benefits of Physical Activity for the Heart

Diseases that affect the heart and blood vessels (**cardiovascular diseases**), such as heart disease and stroke, should be of concern to everyone, and especially to women. Cardiovascular diseases are the leading causes of death for women in the United States. It has been estimated that 1 in 10 women aged 45 to 65 years has some form of heart disease, which increases to 1 in 4 women older than 65 years.

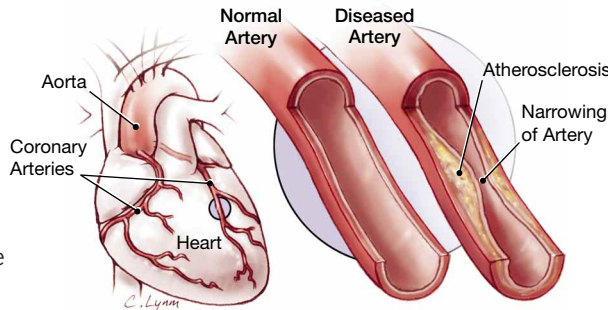
An article in the March 21, 2001, issue of *JAMA* discusses the effects of physical activity on the risk of coronary heart disease in women. The researchers found that light to moderate activity, as well as vigorous activity, was associated with a lower risk of experiencing coronary heart disease.

WHAT IS CORONARY HEART DISEASE?

Coronary heart disease is disease that results from narrowing or blockage of the coronary arteries. The **coronary arteries** are the arteries that supply blood and, therefore, oxygen and nutrients to the heart muscle. When the blood supply is diminished significantly, complications, such as **angina** (chest pain caused by a reduced supply of oxygen to the heart muscle), may occur. When the blood supply is blocked, a **myocardial infarction** (or "heart attack"), which involves damage to part of the heart muscle, may occur.

Risk factors for coronary heart disease include

- Smoking cigarettes
- Having high blood pressure
- Having high levels of cholesterol
- Being overweight
- Being physically inactive
- Having diabetes



BENEFITS OF REGULAR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FOR THE HEART

Regular physical activity

- Improves heart function
- Helps lower the levels of harmful low-density lipoprotein (LDL) type cholesterol in the blood; LDL cholesterol contributes to the process of **atherosclerosis** (the buildup of fatty deposits in the walls of the arteries)
- Helps raise the levels of beneficial high-density lipoprotein (HDL) type cholesterol in the blood; HDL cholesterol prevents buildup of fatty deposits in the arteries
- Helps reduce blood pressure

Sources: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, American Heart Association, *The AMA Complete Guide to Women's Health*, *The AMA Home Medical Library*, *The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine*

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WAYS TO BECOME MORE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

- Set up regularly scheduled time for physical activity
- Get involved with groups or programs that promote physical activities, such as your local park district
- Find a partner and meet regularly for physical activity or an exercise program
- Add walking to your daily routine
- Take the stairs instead of an elevator or escalator
- Walk or ride your bike to the store, to work, and to school, when practical
- Schedule daily exercise breaks

It is important to discuss any plans to begin a significant increase in your physical activity (such as starting a new exercise program) with your doctor.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Heart Association
800/AHA-USA1
www.americanheart.org
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
NHLBI Information Center
301/592-8573; fax 301/592-8563
www.nhlbi.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on *JAMA*'s Web site at www.jama.com. Previous JAMA Patient Pages were published on the benefits of physical activity June 14, 2000, and January 27, 1999.

