

## What A Difference Just 7 Pounds Makes

Previous studies showed obese men being more inclined to develop heart failure. Now the Physicians' Health Study from Brigham and Women's Hospital (Boston, MA) reveals that just a few extra pounds and little or no exercise can up your risk.

Initially published in the December 22, 2008 issue of *Circulation*, an American Heart Association journal, the study was based on the fact that "elevated body mass index is associated with an excess risk of heart failure" and investigated the impact of overweight or pre-obese status and physical activity on heart failure risk.

**Two decades of study.** The prospective cohort—consisting of 21, 094 American male physicians (mean age, 53 years) without known coronary heart disease—combined BMI (body mass index) effects and vigorous physical activity, defined as "sufficient to break a sweat." Researchers further defined physical activity as (1) inactive – rarely or never exercised vigorously and (2) active – vigorous exercise one to three times monthly.

From the study's onset in 1982, participants completed annual health surveys. Investigators then created three BMI categories: lean, overweight (BMI 25-30) and obese (BMI 30 or higher). The focus was on the borderline overweight category: BMI of 25 - 29.9. At the beginning of the study, approximately 5% of the physician participants were obese; 40% were overweight.

Over the course of the 20.5-year study, 1,109 men experienced heart failure.

Adjusting for other risk factors (i.e. high blood pressure, high cholesterol), here is what the findings revealed:

- Regardless of the level of activity, higher body mass index equates to higher heart failure risk.
- Even modestly overweight men had increased heart risk—a risk that increased with excess pounds.
- Every 7 pounds of excess weight equated to a 11% increased heart risk in the 20 years—1 kg/m<sup>2</sup> increase in BMI, men over 5'10" tall in a multivariate analysis.
- Overweight study participants had a 49% heart failure increase.
- Obese study participants had a 180% heart failure increase.
- 18% reduction in heart failure risk in active men—with one to three times per month of physical activity.
- 36% reduction in heart failure in higher activity men—those with five to seven times per week of physical activity.

A higher BMI increased heart failure risk in both active and inactive men, according to lead researcher Dr. Satish Kenchaiah of the U.S. National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute in Bethesda, MD. With that, the "beneficial effect of vigorous physical activity in reducing the risk of heart failure was observed in lean, overweight and also obese men."

### Checkpoints

- **Two-thirds of Americans have excess body weight—and about only 30% exercise regularly.**
- **660,000 new cases of heart failure are diagnosed each year in the U.S.**
- **80% of men and 75% of women aged 65 and older diagnosed with heart failure die within eight years.**
- **Couch potatoes—physically inactive people—are more likely to develop heart disease or have a stroke.**
- **Too much belly fat ups risk for other health problems: high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, high triglycerides, diabetes, heart disease and stroke.**
- **Women with excess body fat are at *higher* risk of heart disease — even if they don't have other risk factors.**
- **30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week (healthy people) is recommended for conditioning heart and lungs per the American Health Association.**



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The take-away message? Whether you're seven pounds or 80 pounds overweight, the bottom line is the same: The more you exercise, the more you reduce your risk for heart failure.

**Your next move.** The key is regular physical activity, so let's get moving. Start walking, dancing, cleaning house, hiking, playing badminton/tennis, shooting some hoops, jogging, swimming, cycling, etc. Even if it's not part of a structured routine, physical activity helps ensure better heart health.

**How much?** The American Heart Association says: Healthy adults ages 18-65 should get at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity five days per week. Those 65 and older—or 50-64 with chronic conditions or physical functional limitations (e.g., arthritis) that affect movement ability or physical fitness—need additional guidelines mandated by their physician.

**Where to start?** Walking has the lowest dropout rate of all exercises—and offers many health benefits. Walking just 30 minutes a day can . . .

- Reduce coronary heart disease risk
- Improve blood pressure and blood sugar levels
- Improve blood lipid profile
- Maintain body weight and reduce your risk of obesity
- Enhance mental well-being
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