

Regular Exercise While Young May Slow Middle-Age Spread

People who consistently exercise during their younger years, especially women, are less likely to face the battle of the bulge that less-consistent types struggle with, researchers say.

Regular exercise while young only appeared to prevent later weight gain if it reached about 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a week, such as running, fast walking, basketball, exercise classes or daily activities like housework. This encourages people to stick with their active lifestyle and a program of activity over decades.

It's important to start young and to stay active but that doesn't mean you can't change. It just may be harder to keep the weight off when you get to be middle-aged. Most of today's research focuses on losing weight, not preventing weight gain in the first place.

To investigate this a US study followed 3,554 men and women aged 18 to 30 at the start of the study, for 20 years. Participants lived in one of four urban areas in the United States: Chicago, Illinois; Birmingham, Alabama; Minneapolis, Minnesota.

After adjusting for various factors such as age and energy intake, men who maintained a high activity level gained an average of 5.7 fewer pounds and women with a high activity level put on 13.4 fewer pounds than their counterparts who exercised less or who didn't exercise consistently over the 20-year period.

Much of that benefit was seen around the waist, with high-activity men gaining 3.1 fewer centimetres around the gut each year and women 3.8 fewer centimetres per year.

The researchers cautioned that higher levels of physical activity alone may not be entirely sufficient to keep off weight, however, noting that men and women at all activity levels gained weight over the 20-year period. Nonetheless, they noted, higher activity certainly helped hold down weight during the transition from youth to middle age.

The 20-year follow-up in this study was particularly impressive especially given that most weight-focused studies these days are shorter term.

You can track weight at key decision points -- what kinds of activities do they do in a reliable manner and what difference it makes.

The gender difference (the magnitude of the benefit was double in women than in men) could be explained by physiological differences.

The two physiological things that are associated with female gender that definitely play a role are having children and menopause, but there could be other physiologic differences we can't measure, and there may also be cultural differences.

We know that for women who are going through menopause, there's this natural increase in weight gain. If you start exercising before menopause hits and do that for 20 years, you don't have to gain weight. Health isn't about flipping a switch. It's about maintaining a lifestyle.

Let's go into middle age with the best opportunities we have for good weight, and you do that by starting early, but it's never too late to start good behaviours. You're just probably going to have to do it more intensively.