

Are runners all that?

New Australian fitness study reveals some surprises - especially about joggers

By: Jill Barker

Runners like to think themselves immune to most of the maladies associated with being inactive. After all, they're part of the minority of Canadians who work up a sweat regularly. They're also part of a community that prides itself on being hardcore, putting in the miles the hard way, one stride at a time. But in a revealing study by a group of Australian researchers, runners might not be as active as they think.

Using the World Health Organization's recommendation to accumulate 150 minutes of moderate/75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity a week in bouts of at least 10 minutes as their baseline, the researchers put accelerometers on three groups of adults ages 25 to 35. The sedentary group had traditional desk jobs and claimed to exercise less than 150 minutes a week. The "joggers" reported accumulating 20 to 40 kilometres of training a week and the runners boasted 50-plus km per week.

The data was gathered for eight days, after which the research team had a measure of just how much activity the individuals in all three groups accumulated over a week. Activity was classified as either sedentary, light, moderate or vigorous, with any activity sustained for more than 10 minutes considered exercise.

The results confirmed a few widely held notions about the habits of runners, but also offered a few surprises. As expected, the runners were leaner and posted more moderate and vigorous intensity activity than the sedentary office workers. What was notable however, was that all three groups spent about the same amount of time in sedentary and light physical activity - despite the runners' claim that they spent less time sitting than the inactive group.

The most surprising result is that 32 per cent of the joggers, who reported running 20-40 km per week, didn't meet the WHO's recommended 150 minutes of moderate/75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity per week.

"This study adds to the existing evidence by showing that even the self-reported habitual joggers, who would conventionally be regarded as physically active, may not accumulate the recommended minimum volume of physical activity during their everyday lives," said the study's authors.

These results back the theory that even those who consider themselves active are at risk of not meeting the recommended quantity of exercise per week.

It also suggests that regular exercise doesn't necessarily lead to fewer hours spent being sedentary, as demonstrated by the nine hours a day all three groups spent being inactive.

What is different between the runners and the non-runners, however, is their willingness to find time to exercise.

But it's not all bad news for the sedentary office workers. A closer look at their stats revealed they were only about seven minutes short of the recommended 150 minutes of exercise a week - even without participating in purposeful bouts of exercise. They typically performed about 20.4 minutes of moderate intensity exercise a day, structured into about 2.5 bouts of about 9.5 minutes of activity.

What do the results mean for runners and non-runners alike? First, it's worth charting your weekly activity using a fitness tracker, like an app on your phone or wearable tech (Fitbit, Garmin, Apple Watch), so you can get an unbiased account of your exercise volume. Not until you know exactly how much exercise you're getting during an average week can you set realistic goals on how to improve.

The same goes for the amount of time you spend sitting. Most fitness trackers and several smartphone apps have built-in reminders to get up and move, which can make all the difference in decreasing the amount of time spent being sedentary at work and at home.

But perhaps the biggest takehome message is that lacing up your running shoes a few times a week doesn't automatically grant you membership into the exercise elite - the minority of Canadians who meet the WHO recommendations. The goal is to incorporate movement into every day, not just the days you run, and to decrease the number of hours you spend inactive.

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