

How much exercise is good for us?

Consistent exercise is good for a person's health and well-being—that much is well-known. But how many minutes of moderate or vigorous physical activity are needed to lower the risk of mortality? A study published in the American journal *Circulation* in 2022 shed some new light on how much and what level of physical activity is needed to reduce our risks of illness or an early death.

It has been unclear for some time whether higher levels of long-term physical activity or just moderate physical activity led to different outcomes. An absolutely huge study of over 100,000 adults over a period of 30 years, compared two groups of individuals, looking at heart disease and mortality.

The best results were amongst people who were able to spend around 150 to 300 minutes every week in long-term vigorous physical activity during their leisure time. Interestingly the same benefits were achieved by people who could commit 300-600 minutes a week to just moderate physical activity.

Moderate physical activity is defined as walking, weightlifting and lower-intensity exercise like yoga and pilates. Meanwhile, vigorous exercise is categorised as running, bicycling and swimming.

Additionally, no harm came to very high performers who, out of personal choice, were exercising up to four times the recommended levels. The mental health benefits of regular physical activity are well documented. People who are more physically active and have better fitness levels are less likely to have mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. Over time, regular exercise re-models the reward system in the brain, leading to higher circulating levels of a substance called dopamine. This in turn, positively influences our willingness to undertake physical exercise.

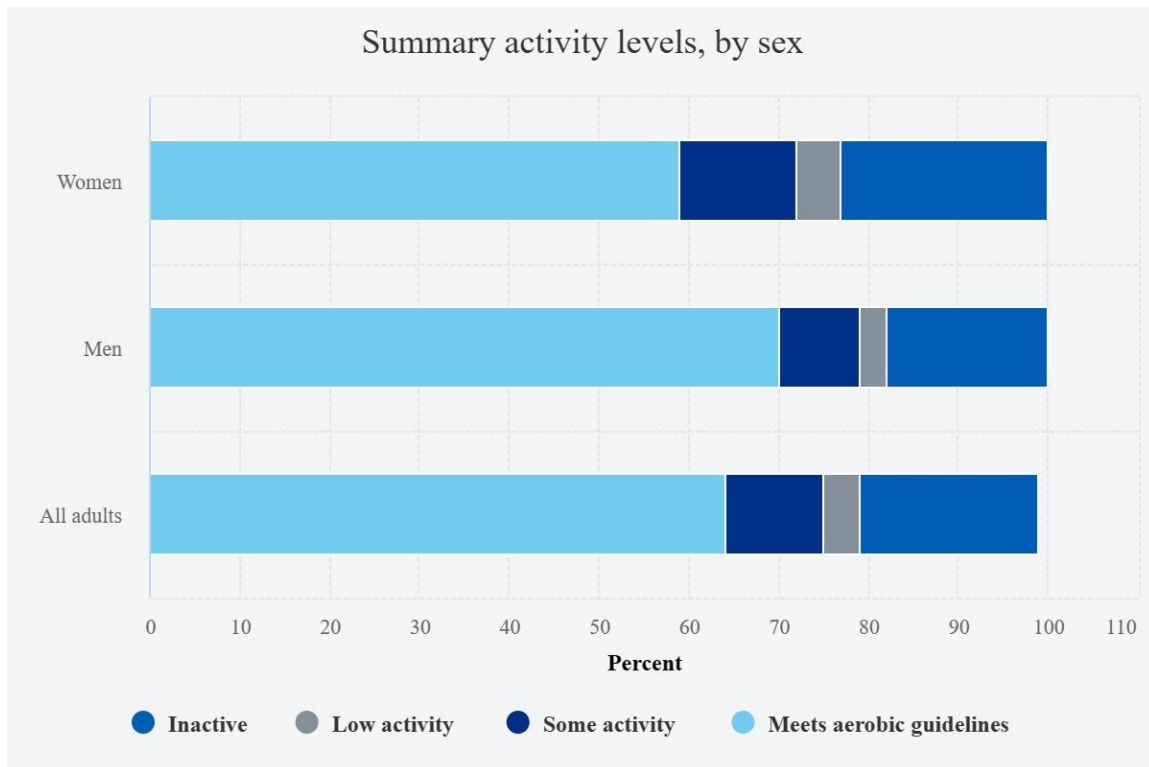
The older guidelines for moderate exercise duration were that we should try for at least 150 -300 minutes a week. For both intensities, it turns out that if adults do more than the recommended amount, it can lower their risk of death.

In the UK our guidelines for exercise over the last decade have been more lenient, asking us to attempt 150 minutes of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week or an equivalent combination of both, in sessions of 10 minutes or more. The health survey for England in 2021 revealed that the proportion of adults meeting even these recommendations was poor in many areas.

There are variations across the country by region, but the cumulative figures are presented in the chart below and they are not improving over the last 2 decades. Whether we participate in heavy housework, manual work in gardening or do-it-yourself activities, walking, or sports, the great news is that even small changes to the amount of activity a person gets, can lead to more significant changes in overall health

As well as the muscle-strengthening guideline, older adults (aged 65 and over) are recommended to do balance exercises on at least two days a week.

Dr Peter Smith. May 2024



Long-Term Leisure-Time Physical Activity Intensity and All-Cause and Cause-Specific Mortality: A Prospective Cohort of US Adults. *Circulation*. 2022;146:523-534

Health Survey for England, 2021