



February 5, 2011 – Grand Rapids, MI

Heart of a Couch Potato

Yesterday was National Wear Red Day[®] to support women's heart disease awareness—I hope you remembered to wear red. Because February is American Heart Month, I'm going to do every message on a topic related to heart health this month. The reason is simple: if your heart stops beating, you're dead. No other aspect of your health really matters at that point because you're not going to be here anyway. Let's see what we can do to prevent that from happening.

I'm going to start with a recently published study on television watching, heart disease, and death (1). If this doesn't at least get you thinking about getting off the couch, I can't think of anything that will.

The Study

Researchers wanted to see if there was a relationship between watching television and all-cause mortality and CVD events—both fatal and nonfatal combined. Experienced interviewers assessed how much time subjects spent watching television per day and how much time they spent in moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity.

The Subjects

Subjects were part of the Scottish Health Survey 2003. Researchers recruited 4,512 men and women 35 and older. The subjects were followed up through 2007 (so far). There was no intervention in this study—the subjects were just tracked after providing the initial information.

The Goal

The researchers wanted to see if there was any relationship between the time spent watching television and the death and illness rate from heart disease. They also wanted to see if BMI, inflammation, and serum lipids could explain any increase in heart disease and mortality.

The Results

This will probably come as no surprise: as the time spent watching television increased, so did death from all causes and the rate of heart disease. There was a 52% increase in mortality for those subjects who watched television four hours or more when compared to those who watched it two hours or less. The increase in the rate of heart disease was even more dramatic. If you watched television four hours or more, you had a 130% increase in cardiovascular disease.

Researchers also found that the couch potatoes had a higher C-reactive protein, a higher BMI, and a lower HDL-cholesterol. Those measures are all indicators of an increased risk of heart disease.

The Bottom Line

A sedentary lifestyle is a prime risk factor for cardiovascular disease and an increased risk of death from all causes. For too many people, watching television is the only prime-time activity. Just because the research compared the highest group with the lowest, don't think that up to two hours per day is fine. The study was about

four years long, so we'll see what happens as the study follow-up continues. It could be that consistently being less sedentary such as watching television for only two hours every night all year long might be just as bad or worse than watching four hours or more for a short period of time.

The lesson for you? Get up off the couch and get moving.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

Reference: J Am Coll Cardiol, 2011; 57:292-299, doi:10.1016/j.jacc.2010.05.065.

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