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## Exercise, Sex, and Death

“Heart-attack risk spikes after sex and exercise” shouted the headline. Who wouldn’t notice that? About the same time as I saw the headline, my iPhone dinged to let me know I got another email. It was the notification of the latest research titles in the current edition of JAMA (1). The research they referred to in the news headline was in this edition, so I checked it out. Should you be concerned to work out or have sex? Let’s see.

### The Research

Two researchers did an extensive review of the literature to find studies that examined the risk of having a heart attack or sudden death after an event of physical or sexual activity. They were after a very specific type of study where what happened with the individual, a cardiac event, was compared to what typically could happen in a specific time period. This is not simple statistics with means and standard deviations.

### The Studies

The researchers found close to 5,000 potential studies but eliminated all but 14. They established that there were 10 studies that examined physical activity, three that examined sexual activity, and one that examined both. They were looking for specific outcomes: heart attack and sudden cardiac death.

### The Results

There was a 345% increase in the risk of a cardiac event in the hour after a single bout of exercise. Think sex was better? Yes, it was. It was only a 270% increased risk of an event in that hour after sex. That sounds scary doesn’t it?

Not really. The absolute risk for having a cardiac event in any given hour is about one out of a million. Raising the risk to three out of a million isn’t that big a deal. I’ll take that risk every time. But that wasn’t the end of the story.

### A Closer Look

The researchers also looked at the relative risk if a person exercised in the week before the exercise or sexual activity. For every day a person exercised in the previous week before the exercise episode, the relative risk decreased about 45%. That translates to a 30% reduced risk of having a cardiac event after a single bout of exercise. There were not enough data to assess the risk with sexual activity, but I’m wagering it would be lower as well.

### The Bottom Line

The headline was provocative as usual because that works—I’ll bet more of you than usual open today’s Message! But the real message is that exercise and sexual activity are safe; if you exercise regularly you can make them even safer. And if you exercise regularly, you may find that your rate of sexual activity increases—yet another reason you and your spouse should exercise together. Who knows what could happen?

What are you prepared to do today?

**Dr. Chet**

Reference: JAMA. 2011;305(12):1225-1233

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