

[Back to This Week's News](#)

How Healthy Can You Get on Diet Alone?

by Allison Van Dusen

(Forbes) For any number of reasons, far too many Americans are sedentary.

An estimated 14.2% of the population spends less than 10 minutes a week on moderately intense activities, such as walking and vacuuming, or vigorous ones, such as running, according to 2005 statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A quarter of Americans say they're not performing any physical activity during their free time.

All of this sitting on the couch or behind a desk is undoubtedly contributing to the country's rising health care costs--but does a lack of exercise necessarily mean we're unhealthy?

Every day, we're bombarded with new reports about how crucial it is to our good health to consume more heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids (found in fish) and cut the trans fats (e.g., doughnuts, french fries). While, of course, you should exercise, if you're not, you may be wondering just how far a focus on diet alone can take you.

Diet Pros

Many experts agree that diet may play a bigger role than exercise when it comes to shedding pounds. However, the most effective method of weight loss tends to be a combination of exercise and a decrease in your overall caloric intake, says Dr. Donald D. Hensrud, medical editor in chief of *Mayo Clinic Healthy Weight for Everybody*.

Eating right also is an essential part of reducing your risk of chronic disease. Watching how much saturated and trans fats you consume may lower your low-density lipoprotein (LDL or "bad cholesterol"), one of the major causes of clogged arteries. Likewise, following a diet similar to the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan has been shown to lower blood pressure and cut the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke. Based on findings by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, DASH is low in animal protein, moderate in low-fat dairy and high in plant proteins, fruits and vegetables.

And avoiding foods high in refined carbohydrates, such as white bread and rice, and instead opting for more vegetables and fruits, can help protect against several forms of cancer, such as those affecting the stomach, lungs, pancreas and prostate, according to the American Institute for Cancer Research.

Some research, though most of it has been done on animals, also suggests that a severely reduced-calorie diet may increase longevity.

Complements of Exercise

But don't get so comfortable in your desk chair yet. As important as eating smart is, experts say the health benefits are greater when combined with physical activity.



Regular exercise can increase high-density lipoprotein (HDL, "good cholesterol"), another component of lowering the risk of heart disease, says Stacey Snelling, a registered dietitian and an associate professor at American University in the Department of Health and Fitness. While diet is one way to address high blood pressure, exercise will also help by making your heart stronger, allowing it to pump more blood with less effort.

If you're concerned about diseases like cancer, for instance, you're far better off keeping up your activity level, since exercise can help keep hormone levels healthy and strengthen the immune system.

What You're Missing

Beyond missing out on these benefits, experts say dieting without an eye toward exercise has a host of other drawbacks.

A 2006 study funded by the National Institutes of Health showed that overweight people in their 50s and 60s who dropped pounds via diet alone also lost muscle mass, strength and aerobic capacity. Those who jogged or biked--no strength training was involved--maintained their strength and muscle mass, as well as increased their aerobic capacity.

"If people are keeping their weight under control strictly by dieting, they might be compromising their muscular strength and function," says Edward Weiss, lead author of the study and assistant professor of nutrition and dietetics at Saint Louis University's Doisy College of Health Sciences.

Losing weight through dietary changes alone also won't affect your body composition, so while you'll weigh less, you'll still have the same percentage of body fat. Strengthening exercises, while they might not result in rapid weight loss, will help improve your muscle-to-fat ratio, says Cedric Bryant, chief science officer for the American Council on Exercise. Since a pound of muscle takes up less volume than a pound of fat, you'll see a difference over time.

"It'll have a pretty profound effect on how you look and fit in your clothing," Bryant says.

Additionally, exercise can improve your mood, increase energy levels and is considered crucial to keeping off the pounds you've shed, according to the National Weight Control Registry.

Exercise is also important because, as we age, we slow down, and our spontaneous physical activity decreases. (Think of the difference between the movement of a 6-year-old boy and an 80-year-old man.) We also lose about 1% of our muscle mass each year, which slows metabolism, Hensrud says. If you're not exercising, eating the same amount of healthy food will translate into weight gain over time.

Bottom Line

If you can't find time to hit the gym, health experts say you're much better off finding ways to sneak short bursts of activity into your day rather than give up altogether.

Need a kick in the pants? Bryant suggests asking your doctor to perform a full blood workup at your next physical to see how well a sedentary lifestyle is working for you.

And, conversely, if you're one of those people who exercise so you can eat whatever you want, know that you're probably not as healthy as you think, either.

"Exercise and diet is always going to be the best strategy," Weiss says. "If you're good with one, that doesn't mean you can brush off the other."

