The health of a couch potato

Dear Alice,

What are the health implications of a sedentary life?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Everyone needs to kick back and relax now and then, but too much bonding time with the couch and TV remote control can lead to serious health problems. This is of concern, because according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), less than 50 percent of adults in the United States don't meet the recommended physical activity guidelines. And, even though busting a move on the regular is a key component to personal health, practicing other complimentary healthy lifestyle behaviors will help further promote overall well-being.

The human body functions best when it's active regularly. To speak more to your question, it might be better to describe the benefits of not being sedentary rather than the risks. There are a number of ways in which regular physical activity can improve health, including:

- Reducing the risk of developing coronary heart disease (CHD) or having a stroke
- Lowering both total blood cholesterol and triglycerides and increases high-density lipoproteins (HDL or the "good" cholesterol)
- Lowering the risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- Reducing the risk of developing some cancers, including breast and colon cancer
- Helping people achieve and maintain a healthy body weight
- Reducing feelings of depression and anxiety
- Promoting psychological well-being, restful sleep, and reduces feelings of stress
- Helping build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints
- Helping older adults become stronger and better able to move about without falling or becoming excessively fatigued
- Reduces the risk of early death and increases likelihood of a longer life

Leading a sedentary life doesn't mean a person will develop all or even most of these conditions, however, the risk for developing any of these conditions could be higher. Daily physical activity - even walking for as little as 30 minutes each day - can greatly reduce the risk for many major medical issues. But, don’t forget about adding a couple strength-building activities to your week, too!
Being active can take a lot of forms?with or without a friend or exercise buddy?whether it?s swimming, rock-climbing, working up a sweat at the gym, dancing, walking around the neighborhood, taking the stairs rather than the elevator, parking a little farther away, or getting off at an earlier subway or bus stop. With so many options to get moving, most folks can find one or more they can stick with and enjoy. For some general tips on getting started, visit the CDC website and learn how to overcome some common barriers to getting active.

Making a change to put down the remote and get off of the couch is a step toward a healthy, more fulfilling, and longer life. For those looking to add physical activity to their day-to-day routine, it?s a good idea to start slow, find an enjoyable activity, and devise a way to stick with it. It may also be wise to speak with a health care provider to get an overall health assessment and tailored recommendations about how to be active in a safe way. In addition to getting a move on, adopting or maintaining other behaviors such as getting enough quality rest, finding ways to manage stress in healthy ways, and eating a balanced diet can really boost a person?s health promoting efforts. For more on ways to incorporate these into your life, take a look at the related Q&As and others in the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity archives.

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