

Too much TV can be fatal

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A recent study reports that sedentary people who watch a lot of television are at greater risk of prematurely developing cardiovascular diseases.

THE DANGERS OF BEING SEDENTARY

It has now been established beyond all doubt that regular physical activity is associated with a marked reduction in the risks of cardiovascular diseases and of premature death. This preventive potential unfortunately remains largely underutilized as it is estimated that about 85% of the Canadian population do not exert the recommended minimum of 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week and that half of all adults dedicate about two thirds (10 hours) of their waking time to sedentary activities, devoid of all physical expenditures.

This lifestyle is truly not optimal for health, not only because it does not allow one to take advantage of the benefits of physical activity but also because being sedentary can itself lead to health problems, independent of those caused by the lack of exercise. Not moving is a physiologically abnormal state and sedentary people exhibit important metabolic changes, notably regarding the absorption of fats and of blood sugars, and have an elevated risk of suffering from obesity and from diverse chronic diseases. These dangers of sedentariness are well illustrated by the many studies showing that lack of physical activity increases by 28% the risk of premature death and is directly responsible each year for more than five million deaths worldwide, nearly as much as smoking¹.

CAPTIVATED BY THE SCREEN

We must remain conscious of the pitfalls of being sedentary because occasions for doing nothing physical are ubiquitous in this era, particularly with regards to recreation. Aside from television, where one can now watch numerous series, films and broadcasts, it is also possible to spend many hours in front of the computer, the tablet, the cell phone or even video game consoles.

According to a recent study, one of the principal consequences of this sedentariness associated with “screen time” is an acceleration of the appearance of cardiovascular diseases and, consequently, a decreased lifespan in good health². By analyzing the television viewing habits and physical activity of 13,584 middle-aged people (45-64 years) over a period of 27 years, the researchers found that those who were physically active and only occasionally watched television lived on average two and half years more without developing a cardiovascular disease, whether it was coronary disease, strokes or heart failure. It is strongly probable that these positive effects were underestimated by the report because real life also involves time spent in front of the latest electronic gadgets (telephone, tablet, streaming) which greatly contribute to actual screen time, and which were not measured in this study.



These observations are interesting because the prevention of chronic diseases does not only increase lifespan: it also (and possibly primarily) acts to increase the number of years of life in good health, free from diseases which decrease the quality of life. Increasing this lifespan in good health by nearly 3 years simply by watching less television thus represents an easily achievable target which is within reach of everyone.

- (1) Lee IM et al. Effect of physical inactivity on major non-communicable diseases worldwide: an analysis of burden of disease and life expectancy. *Lancet* 2012; 380: 219-29.
- (2) Cuthbertson CC et al. Associations of leisure-time physical activity and television viewing with life expectancy free of nonfatal cardiovascular disease: the ARIC study. *J. Am. Heart Assoc.* 2019; 8: e012657.