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Not Exercising Is Worse for You Than Being Obese

A large-scale study estimates that twice as many deaths can be chalked up to lack of exercise than can be blamed on being obese



(Foodcollection/the food passionates/Corbis)

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Being overweight or obese carries with it social stigma ([even from your doctors](#)) and [a host of risk factors](#) — for diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and heart disease — that can herald an early

death. But being inactive might carry the biggest risks. A huge, 12-year-long study emphasizes this point with the finding that a lack of physical activity claims twice as many lives as obesity does.

The [European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition \(EPIC\) study](#) is following more than half a million Europeans in 10 countries to look for links between diet, nutrition, lifestyle, the environment and the occurrence of cancer and other diseases. Using that data set, researchers based at the University of Cambridge, looked at 334,161 men and women for the relationship between physical activity and premature death. Over the 12 years that they asked for weight, waist circumference and activity levels, 21,438 participants died.

The researchers found that if people who reported no physical activity had done a little exercise—just a 20 minute brisk walk every day—they could have reduced their chance of dying early by between 16 to 30 percent. "This is a simple message: just a small amount of physical activity each day could have substantial health benefits for people who are physically inactive," says Ulf Ekelund, of the University of Cambridge and lead author on the study, [in a press statement](#).

If all inactive people did that little bit of exercise, deaths across the board would be theoretically be reduced by 7.35 percent. By comparison, if no one was obese, that would reduce deaths by 3.66 percent. This result suggests "that physical inactivity is responsible for more than twice as many deaths as general obesity," at least in Europe, write the study authors. The [study was published](#) in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

"The greatest risk [of an early death] was in those classed inactive, and that was consistent in normal weight, overweight and obese people," [Ekelund told BBC News](#). Even lean people who don't exercise aren't as healthy as they should be. That doesn't mean that we still shouldn't strive to avoid obesity, he adds, just that any exercise at all is important, even when you are overweight.

And if that news isn't so new to you... if you've heard it before and know you want to get off your tush but just lack the confidence (perhaps because you fear being judged for your weight while you exercise), then take a look at the "This Girl Can" campaign for Sport England. It features women of all shapes, sizes and a broad diversity of race and age working out and rocking it.

The ad agency who created it cast British women they found "outside gyms and football pitches and even while out on a run," [writes Meg Carter for *Fast Company*](#). One of the ad's slogans reads, "sweating like a pig, feeling like a fox." Now, please excuse this reporter while she goes for a run.