

Newsletter

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Fidget your way to fitness

Rob Stein, The Washington Post
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Fidget your way to fitness, study concludes mundane body movements burn 350 calories a day.

Strolling to the bus stop, fidgeting during a meeting, standing up to stretch, jumping off the couch to change channels and other seemingly minor physical activity can make the difference between being lean and obese, researchers reported.

The most detailed study ever conducted of mundane bodily movements found that obese people tend to be much less fidgety than lean people and spend at least two hours more each day just sitting still. The extra motion by lean people is enough to burn about 350 extra calories a day, which could add up to 10 to 20 pounds a year, the researchers found.

'There are these absolutely staggering differences between people who are lean and people who are obese,' said James Levine of the Mayo Clinic, who led the research being published in today's issue of the journal Science. "The amount of this low-grade activity is so substantial that it could, in and of itself, account for obesity quite easily."

Perhaps is more importantly, Levine and his colleagues also discovered that people appear to be with a propensity to be either fidgety or listless, indicating it will take special measures to convert the naturally sedentary into the restless – especially in a society geared toward a couch-potato existence.

"Some may say this is a story of doom and gloom – that people with obesity have no choice. It's all over. I would argue exactly the opposite," Levine said. "There's a massive beacon of hope here. But it's going to take a massive, top-down approach to change the environment in which we live to get us up and be lean again."

Other researchers agreed, saying the new study, while small, provides powerful new evidence that a major cause of the obesity epidemic is the pattern of desk jobs, car pool, suburban sprawl and other environmental and lifestyle factors that discourage physical activity. And despite generations of parents' admonishments to the contrary, people should be encouraged to fidget.

"Figuring out ways to increase physical activity – not necessarily getting people jogging every day but just building physical activity into a person's day – are strategies that have the promise to combat this epidemic of obesity," said William Dietz of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

The number of Americans who are overweight has risen dramatically in recent years, with more than two-thirds now overweight or obese, raising the prospect of an epidemic of heart disease, diabetes and other weight-related ills. The reason for this is a subject of intense debate, with many experts blaming a combination of too much junk food and too little exercise.

Levine and others have done earlier studies suggesting a dearth of routine activity may be part of the problem, but the new study is the most exhaustive to date.

"We all know people who can't seem to stand still and others who hardly move," said Eric Ravussin of the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, LA., who wrote a commentary on the study.

"This is really the first time this has been assessed in this level of detail."