

Fitness: Thin people should exercise.

For many people the main reason that they start to exercise regularly is to try and lose some weight. Indeed, exercise is seen as a way of controlling one's weight and perhaps the other health benefits that flow from regular exercise are overlooked to a greater or lesser extent – and it is these other benefits that health professionals may need to stress when confronted with a lean person who is in effect a couch potato. It is vitally important to get over the idea that being slim does not necessarily equate to being healthy.

Take, for example, the situation in relation to LDL cholesterol. It is well known that levels of LDL cholesterol should be kept in check if you are to look after the health of your heart and a person's size can not be used as an accurate guide as to what their LDL levels are. For some people, their LDL cholesterol can be brought under control by eating a low fat diet which will probably lead to a reduction in their weight but for others, it won't matter how thin they are, their blood cholesterol levels will remain high.

Research carried out comparing the LDL levels of lean exercisers (classed as those who undertook regular cardiovascular exercise, such as running or cycling, three times a week or more), lean non-exercisers and obese non-exercisers found that the lean exercisers had good LDL levels, but levels in lean and obese non-exercisers were higher and similar. For the purposes of the study, waist girth was used to assess obesity – those with a waist measurement of more than 100cms at the narrowest point were classed as obese.

The study, carried out by a team lead by Dr. Gary O'Donovan from Brunel University in the UK, was specifically designed to investigate the question of whether the favourable cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk factor profile of habitual exercisers was attributable to exercise or leanness. The research was in the form of a cross-sectional study of 113 nonsmoking men aged 30-45 years, with similar socio-economic profiles. CVD risk factors were compared between the three subgroups – lean exercisers ($n=39$), lean sedentary men ($n=46$) and obese sedentary men ($n=28$). Dr O'Donovan suggested that, because the profiles of the men were the same, it was a reasonable assumption that the differences in cholesterol results were linked to whether the person exercised or not.

The next phase of the research by the Brunel University team is to investigate the cholesterol levels of the "fat fit", that is to say those people who are obese but take regular exercise. If such a study found that LDL-cholesterol was similar in obese exercisers and lean exercisers, it would suggest that habitual exercise lowers heart disease risk independent of body fat.

Reference:-

G O'Donovan, A Owen, E M Kearney, D W Jones, A M Nevill, K Woolf-May and S R Bird Cardiovascular disease risk factors in habitual exercisers, lean sedentary men and abdominally obese sedentary men International Journal of Obesity (2005) 29, 1063–1069. doi: 10.1038/sj.ijo.0803004; published online 31 May 2005