According to a recent study, exercise, while generally associated with improved health, may be linked to an increased risk of heart disease.

The common wisdom surrounding exercise typically espouses that it’s a basically good practice – with greater exercise, there is greater health. A research team has recently posited differently. The team, led by Claude Bouchard, Ph.D. of the Pennington Biomedical Research Center, concluded in its analysis of six separate studies involving nearly 1,700 people that about ten percent performed worse on at least one heart-disease related measure. Further, around seven percent performed worse on two measures. Bouchard admits the phenomenon “is bizarre.” Dr. Michael Lauer, director of the Division of Cardiovascular Sciences at the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, adds, “We do not know whether implementing exercise programs for unfit people assures better outcomes.” Interestingly, the authors could not find any universal predicting factors. Neither one’s starting level of fitness, improvement in fitness, age, race, or gender could explain an individuals’ worse performance on a measure related to heart disease.

Some fear that the study may further disincentivize people to not exercise. William Haskell, Ph. D., Standford University, warns, “There are a lot of people out there looking for any excuse not to exercise.” More positively, though, the study found that around ten percent had an exceptionally good response on at least one measure; ten percent also had a 20 to 50 percent improvement on a measure.

The Department of Health and Human Services’ national exercise guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week. The limitation with this recommendation and other exercise regimens is their inability to consider possible adverse effects of exercise. It is difficult and costly to tailor an exercise program to each individual. The study found that while exercise may improve one measure, another measure may have an equal or greater chance of worsening. “You can’t have it both ways,” claims Bouchard.
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