

Health Tips

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with

Dr. D



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Health Tip: Lessons from the Dallas Bedrest Study

"If you rest, you rust"....Helen Hayes

In 1996, a very interesting study evaluating the effects of inactivity was performed at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. In this experiment, known as the Dallas Bedrest Study, 5 young men in their 20's were placed at bed rest for 3 weeks. Prior to, and after this 3 week period, physiologic testing was performed. Following the period of rest, marked deterioration of a number of fitness parameters were noted. Heart rates were elevated, as was blood pressure. The heart's maximum pumping capacity was reduced, total body fat increased, and overall muscle strength decreased. In fact, following the bed rest phase of the study, these previously healthy 20-year-olds had developed a number of physiologic characteristics that were more similar to men twice their age. The next phase of the study involved an 8 week period of rigorous physical training. In most cases, this training erased the effects of the inactive period, and in some cases, subjects were more fit than ever.

The study didn't end there, however. Fast forward about 30 years later, and all of the subjects who participated in the original study agreed to be tested again. All 5 of them had remained fairly healthy, and none of them were taking medication. Instead of a period of bed rest, this time the researchers asked them to participate in a gradually progressive, 6-month exercise program involving walking, jogging, and cycling. Following the 6 month period of exercise, the 5 men received physiologic testing similar to what they

received in the original study. Not surprisingly, in the ensuing 30 years, all of the men, now middle aged, exhibited physiologic changes related to aging. Their body weight and percentage of body fat increased. Their maximum oxygen consumption declined and the amount of blood that their hearts were able to pump with each beat decreased. What was remarkable, however, was that the amount of physiologic aging that occurred over the 30 years since the study was less than had occurred during their 3 weeks of bed rest during the original study.



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The Texas studies demonstrated that performing endurance exercise is an effective way to



maintain cardiovascular function and to protect the body from the effects of aging. Exercise can reduce body fat, raise the HDL ("good") cholesterol, boost heart function, reduce the risk of developing diabetes and prevent the development of hypertension. Another important aspect of the Dallas study is that it showed that it is never too late to begin exercising. The subjects in the studies responded nearly as well to exercise when they were in their 50's as when they were in their 20's. Results of this study have influenced a number of medical treatments, most notably, initiating physical activity soon after a heart attack. Furthermore, it validates the concept of "use it or lose it" as far as fitness is concerned. We cannot completely avoid the effects of aging on our physiology, but it sure looks like we can postpone them.

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