



Fit in fidgeting if you can't get exercise time

If you think children and teenagers are getting heavier, you are right. Since 1980, the percentage of overweight children has more than doubled. A recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey indicates that 13 percent of children aged 6 to 11 are overweight. And this cannot be attributed to "baby fat." Also, 14 percent of teenagers (12 to 19 years of age) are overweight.

Of course, the simple version of what causes weight gain is eating more calories than are used. After enough calories are consumed to maintain essential body functions and physical activity, excess calories are stored mostly as fat. To lose weight, the formula is to eat less calories and/or burn more calories with physical activity.

Recently, James Levine and co-researchers at the Mayo Clinic conducted a study to determine how much extra energy is used by the body in what they called non-exercise activities. In other words, they measured the energy used in fidgeting.

In children this may involve

wiggling around or failing to sit still. Adults tend to fidget with the bouncing leg, twitching pencil or finger tapping.

The study involved 24 adults, but the information is applicable to children as well. Researchers monitored energy use at rest, sitting and standing. Then subjects were asked to add self-selected fidgeting activities while sitting and standing and their energy use was measured again. Important findings:

>> Some people use as much as 800 calories a day just fidgeting. That is the equivalent of walking or jogging about 8 miles a day for the average person!

>> There was significant variation in the amount of self-selected fidgeting, and therefore the amount of energy used.

>> Overweight and obese individuals tended to fidget less and therefore expended fewer calories. Their average energy used in fidgeting was about 200 calories per day, comparable to walking about 2 miles.

>> Other studies at Mayo Clinic have shown that women tend to fidget less and therefore

burn fewer calories this way.

How does this adult research relate to children and the increasing weight problem? Before television and computer games, children had to entertain themselves. Some would read, but many would go in search of friends or something to do. Even without planned physical activity, fidgeting or wandering used up calories.

What are the practical implications of this research?

As with overweight adults, overweight children run an increased risk of illnesses such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Being a fidgeter may actually help achieve long-term health, even though fidgeting is frequently viewed socially as unacceptable. So next time your kid or co-worker is distracting you with vigorous twitching and squirming, realize that they may be doing it for their health.

And if you can't seem to fit in a workout, the next best option maybe to increase your own fidgeting!

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