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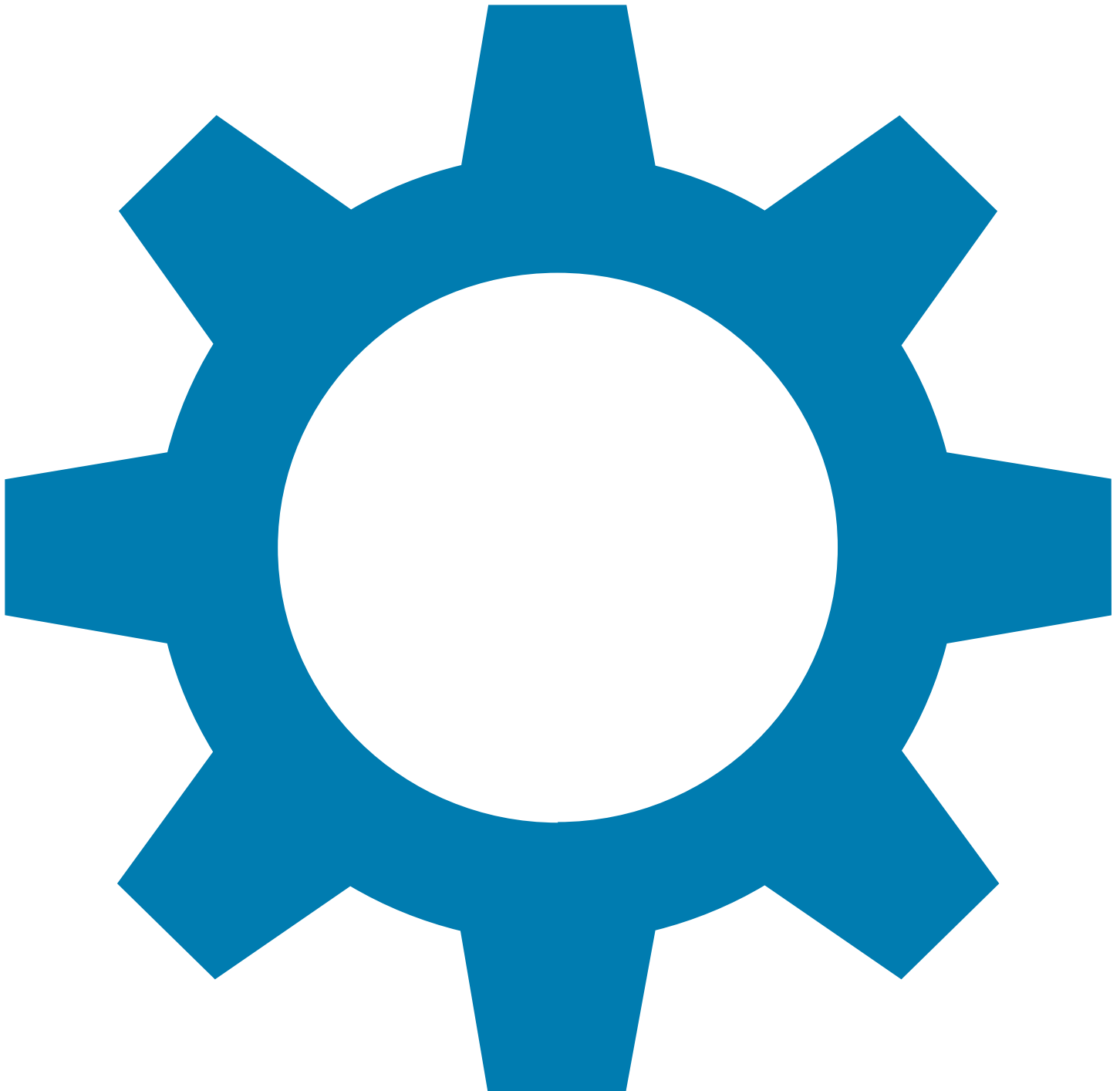
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More Exercise Linked to Lower Chance of Severe COVID-19: Study

Damian McNamara

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So what is the connection? Regular exercise can improve immune function, for one. "We have known for a long time that immune function improves with regular physical activity, and those who are regularly active have a lower incidence, intensity of symptoms and death from viral infections," Young said.

Additional benefits include greater lung capacity and improved cardiovascular and muscle function "that may serve to lessen the negative impacts of COVID-19," she said.

"To put it simply, exercise is medicine. If you have a better baseline cardiac and pulmonary function – as you would expect from someone who meets physical activity guidelines – then it stands to reason you can better withstand the stressor of COVID-19 that impacts many body systems," Monica Verduzco-Gutierrez, MD, chair of the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at UT Health San Antonio Long School of Medicine in Texas, told *Medscape Medical News*.

To learn more, Young, lead author Robert Sallis, and their colleagues evaluated 48,440 adults in the Kaiser Permanente system. Each had a positive COVID-19 test or diagnosis between Jan. 1 and Oct. 21, 2020. Their mean age was 47 years and 62% were women.

The researchers also required patients have at least three outpatient visits with exercise assessments between March 19, 2018 and March 19, 2020. The majority of participants were in the "some physical activity" category, with only 6.4% meeting [US physical activity recommended levels](#) and another 14.4% consistently inactive.

Higher Odds of Poor Outcomes

Compared to the most active group meeting the guidelines, the people with COVID-19 who reported 10 minutes or less of physical activity per week had a greater risk of hospitalization (odds ratio, 2.25; 95% confidence interval, 1.81 to 2.83). They also were more likely to

required admission to the ICU (OR 1.73; 95% CI, 1.18 to 2.55) and to die (OR 2.49; 95% CI 1.33 to 4.67) due to COVID-19.

Furthermore, compared to the 'some physical activity group, patients who were consistently inactive also had a greater risk of hospitalization (OR 1.20; 95% CI 1.10 to 1.32), admission to the ICU (OR 1.10; 95% CI 0.93 to 1.29) and death (OR 1.32; 95% CI 1.09 to 1.60) due to COVID-19.

"I did not expect the odds ratios to be as strong as we found, particularly after controlling for known risk factors for COVID-19, especially [obesity](#) status," Young said. She and colleagues also adjusted for other underlying conditions, age, sex, race and smoking status.

"It's a great study," Arena said. "It builds upon this evidence base that is quickly growing in the COVID pandemic era where lifestyle is tremendously important. Leading a healthy lifestyle protects you from chronic disease but also from complications with viral infection."

Previous research has pointed to similar benefits between physical activity and COVID-19 outcomes. A [study](#) published first as a preprint in May 2020 evaluated how lifestyle and other factors could affect The British Biobank study included 387,109 adults in the United Kingdom. These researchers also found that physical activity was a very strong predictor of less severe complications with COVID-19.

Another research group demonstrated in a [January 2021 study](#) that greater exercise capacity, estimated from grade and speed on a treadmill, was also a significant predictor of better COVID complications.

A Lockdown on Physical Activity?

Education about the benefits of physical activity and advice to maintain or increase physical activity during the pandemic in the US has been "essentially absent," the researchers note.

Young said, "The potential for regular physical activity to lower COVID-19 illness severity should be promoted by the medical community and public health agencies."

"People are moving even less now," Arena said. "The big concern is does this become the new norm after we emerge from the pandemic?" He and colleagues published a '[Tale of Two Pandemics](#)' commentary earlier this year examining the interplay between COVID-19 and the global inactivity and sedentary behavior trends.

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