

Get Peddling to Lower Risk of Cardiovascular Disease



Leisure and commuter cycling may be an important public health strategy in large-scale efforts to reduce cardiovascular risk, according to the findings of two large observational studies just published in *Circulation* and in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*. And as little as 30 minutes a week may have a protective effect.

In the [Circulation study](#) the researchers, from the University of Southern Denmark, tracked participants' overall exercise habits, activity levels and frequency of cycling, along with heart disease risk factors, such as blood pressure, weight, cholesterol, smoking, diet and alcohol consumption. Participants were asked to provide information about cycling habits at the start of the study and once more in five years.

45,000 Danish adults (50 to 65 years), who regularly cycled had between 11 percent and 18 percent fewer heart attacks during a 20-year follow-up (1993-2013). The people who took up cycling during the first five years the researchers followed them had about a 25 percent lower risk of developing heart disease, compared with those who remained non-cyclists in the subsequent 15-year period.

There were 2,892 heart attacks during the 20-year follow-up, and the researchers estimate that more than 7 percent of all heart attacks could have been averted by taking up cycling and keeping it up on a regular basis.

Swedish Study

The study of Swedish adults, published in the [Journal of the American Heart Association](#), followed more than 20,000 people in their 40s, 50s and 60s over 10 years and monitored their commuting habits, weight, cholesterol levels, blood glucose and blood pressure. Those who cycled to work were less likely to be obese, have high cholesterol, high blood pressure or pre-diabetes. And participants who took up cycling to work also had an improved risk profile over time. Interestingly, there was no minimum amount of time or distance required to reduce one's risk, even though people who cycled longer or more often experienced small additional gains in risk reduction.

At the start of the study, active commuters were 15 percent less likely to be obese, 13 percent less likely have high blood pressure, 15 percent less likely to have high cholesterol and 12 percent less likely to have pre-diabetes or diabetes, compared with passive commuters.

At 10-year follow-up, those who maintained cycling or took up cycling at some point had a 39-percent lower risk of obesity, 11 percent lower risk of high blood pressure, 20 percent lower risk of high cholesterol and 18 percent lower diabetes risk.

Senior study author, Paul Franks, PhD, Professor, Department of Clinical Science, Lund University in Sweden and guest professor at Umeå University in Sweden, said in a media release that active commuting had multiple benefits and may be easier for clinicians to tell patients about than asking them to join a gym, go for a jog or take up sports.

Because the study was observational, it is difficult to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between improved cardiovascular health and commuter biking, but the findings do indicate a strong cardio-protective effect from cycling.

Based on their findings, researchers also estimated that maintaining biking habits or switching from passive commuting to biking may have prevented 24 percent of obesity cases, 6 percent of hypertension diagnoses, 13 percent of high cholesterol diagnoses, and 11 percent of the cases of diabetes.

"The really good news here is that it's never too late to benefit from an active lifestyle," Franks said. "People who switched from passive to active commuting saw considerable gains in their cardiovascular health."

Source: [American Heart Association](#)

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