

Olympians live longer than general population... But cyclists no survival advantage over golfers

December 13 2012

Olympic medallists live longer than the general population, regardless of country of origin, medal won, or type of sport played, finds a study in the Christmas issue published on *BMJ* today.

A second study comparing athletes who trained at different physical intensities, found that those from high or [moderate intensity](#) sports have no added [survival benefit](#) over athletes from low intensity sports. But those who engage in disciplines with high levels of physical contact, such as boxing, rugby and ice hockey, are at an increased risk of death in later life, the data show.

An accompanying editorial adds that everyone could enjoy the "[survival advantage](#)" of [elite athletes](#) by just meeting physical activity guidelines.

In the first study, researchers compared life expectancy among 15,174 Olympic athletes who won medals between 1896 and 2010 with general [population groups](#) matched by country, sex, and age.

All medallists lived an average of 2.8 years longer – a significant survival advantage over the general population in eight out of the nine country groups studied.

Gold, silver and bronze medallists enjoyed roughly the same survival advantage, as did medallists in both endurance and mixed sports.

Medallists in power sports had a smaller, but still significant, advantage over the general population.

The authors say that, although their study was not designed to determine why Olympic athletes live longer, "possible explanations include genetic factors, physical activity, [healthy lifestyle](#), and the wealth and status that come from international sporting glory."

In the second study, researchers measured the effect of high [intensity exercise](#) on mortality later in life among former [Olympic athletes](#).

They tracked 9,889 athletes with a known age at death, who took part in at least one [Olympic Games](#) between 1896 and 1936. Together they represented 43 disciplines requiring different levels of exercise intensity and physical contact.

After adjusting for sex, year of birth and nationality, they found that athletes from sports with high cardiovascular intensity (such as cycling and rowing) or moderate cardiovascular intensity (such as gymnastics and tennis) had similar mortality rates compared with athletes from low cardiovascular intensity sports, such as golf or cricket.

However, the researchers did find an 11% increased risk of mortality among athletes from disciplines with a high risk of body collision and with high levels of physical contact, such as boxing, rugby and ice hockey, compared with other athletes. They suggest this reflects the impact of repeated collisions and injuries over time.

In an accompanying editorial, two public health experts point out that people who do at least 150 minutes a week of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity also have a survival advantage compared with the inactive general population. Estimates range from just under a year to several years.

But they argue that, compared with the successes that have been achieved in tobacco control, "our inability to improve physical activity is a public health failure, and it is not yet taken seriously enough by many in government and in the medical establishment."

"Although the evidence points to a small survival effect of being an Olympian, careful reflection suggests that similar health benefits and longevity could be achieved by all of us through regular physical activity. We could and should all award ourselves that personal gold medal," they conclude.

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: Olympians live longer than general population... But cyclists no survival advantage over golfers (2012, December 13) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-12-olympians-longer-population-cyclists-survival.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.