

# Lack of free time is not a barrier to Americans getting more exercise

October 28 2019

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Americans may not be too busy to exercise after all. A new RAND Corporation study finds that Americans average more than 5 hours of free time each day, with men generally having a bit more free time than

women.

But instead of being physically active during their free hours, Americans report they spend most of that time looking at screens (televisions, phones or other devices) with no gender or economic group spending even 7% of their free time on [physical activity](#).

"There is a general perception among the public and even public health professionals that a lack of leisure time is a major reason that Americans do not get enough physical activity," said Dr. Deborah Cohen, co-author of the study and a physician researcher at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "But we found no evidence for those beliefs."

The RAND study, published in the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*, analyzed information from the American Time Use Survey from 2014 through 2016, which included information from more than 32,000 Americans aged 15 and older.

The federal survey follows a representative sample of American families and periodically asks one family member to record their activities over a 24-hour period.

RAND researchers examined findings from the survey, using fairly restrictive measures to estimate the amount of "free" time Americans have on average. For example, researchers excluded from free time activities such as self-care, household activities and family caretaking (this included grooming, shopping and playing with children).

Examining the findings by age and [racial groups](#), researchers found no group reported less than 4.5 hours of free time per day. Men reported having more than a half-hour of additional free time each day than [women](#).

There were large differences among different race and ethnic groups. Black men reported about an hour more daily free time than white men and 1.5 hours more free time than Hispanic men. Similar patterns were seen among women of different racial groups.

Men spent a mean of 6.6% of their free time on physical activity, while women spent a mean of 5% of their free time on physical activity. Higher income men and women spent a larger share of their free time on physical activities and less on screen time than did lower-income men and women.

"Increasing the public's awareness of how they actually use their time and creating messages that encourage Americans to reduce their screen time may help people to become more physically active," Cohen said. "These findings suggest getting Americans to devote at least 20 or 30 minutes each day to physical activity is feasible."

Physical activity can improve health by lowering the risk and severity of chronic disease such as heart disease, and improve mental health and physical well-being. Insufficient levels of physical activity may account for 8% of the deaths in the U.S. each year.

According to the latest National Health Interview Survey, only about about 53% of Americans meet the aerobic guidelines of engaging in moderate or vigorous activity 150 minutes each week.

**More information:** Roland Sturm et al, Free Time and Physical Activity Among Americans 15 Years or Older: Cross-Sectional Analysis of the American Time Use Survey, *Preventing Chronic Disease* (2019). [DOI: 10.5888/pcd16.190017](https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd16.190017)

Provided by RAND Corporation

Citation: Lack of free time is not a barrier to Americans getting more exercise (2019, October 28) retrieved 27 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-10-lack-free-barrier-americans.html>

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