Report Links Physical Inactivity and Sedentary Time During the Pandemic to Depression

A new report finds people who were less physically active and were more sedentary during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before, were more likely to experience symptoms of depression than people who maintained an active lifestyle. The study appearing in the journal, *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, used data provided by a subsample of participants from the American Cancer Society's Cancer Prevention Study-3 (CPS-3), and is one of a few longitudinal studies, and the largest and most inclusive in terms of age within the United States, to examine the relationships between COVID-related changes in physical activity and sedentary time with mental health.

Researchers led by Erika Rees-Punia, PhD, MPH, American Cancer Society, used data from 2018 and Summer 2020 to create categories representing change from before to during the pandemic based on compliance with the Physical Activity Guidelines for moderate-to-vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity (MVPA) and relative sedentary time. Among 2,240 participants (65% women, mean age 57.5 years), 67% increased sedentary time and 21% became inactive (meaning they went from meeting to not meeting the MVPA guidelines) between the two time points.

Data show participants who became inactive were almost twice as likely to experience symptoms of depression compared to those who remained active. In addition, results show participants who increased sedentary time and became inactive were three times more likely to have symptoms of depression than those who maintained sedentary time and remained active.

"Finding ways to be physically active during times such as the pandemic that feel stressful, tiring, and a little scary, may be a good way to reduce the likelihood of experiencing feelings of depression," said Dr. Rees-Punia.

Data show that being more physically active is associated with a lower risk of at least seven different types of cancer. There are many ways to safely remain active during the pandemic: such as walking or jogging outdoors with friends while keeping physical distance or following an exercise video on YouTube at home, for example. Authors also warn that it is important to make an effort to avoid sitting too much: try getting up during commercial breaks while watching TV and try to spend more time on active hobbies (for example, gardening or dancing over watching movies or playing computer games).

"Identifying adaptable strategies for easing feelings of psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, associated with the COVID-19 pandemic remains a public health priority," said the authors. "These findings support the value of promoting physical activity and limiting sedentary time during stress-inducing public health events that require physical distancing, limited person-to-person contact, and social isolation."

Article: Rees-Punia E, Newton CC, Westmass JL, Chantaprasopsuk S, Patel AV, Leach CR. Prospective COVID-19 related changes in physical activity and sedentary time and associations with symptoms of depression and anxiety. *Mental Health and Physical Activity.* doi: 10.1016/j.mhpa.2021.100425.