

What is the single **best** thing we can do for our health?

Text: Menzi C. Ngcobo, Biokineticist, ISR, UP

If you look up the word sport in the dictionary, it is defined as an activity involving some sort of physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others. Sport can either involve casual or organised participation with the aim to maintain or improve physical ability and skills while providing entertainment to participants, and in some cases, spectators. In both forms of participation, sport is usually governed by a set of rules or customs, which serve to ensure fair play, and allow consistent adjudication of the winner.

Although sport is generally recognised as activities which involve physical athleticism or physical dexterity, a number of competitive but non-physical activities claim recognition as mind sports. The International Olympic Committee for example, recognises both chess and bridge as bona fide sports. There has been an increase in the application of the term "sport" to a wider set of non-physical challenges such as electronic sports, especially due to the large scale of participation and organised competition, but these are not widely recognised by mainstream sports organisations.

One possible etymology of the word sport comes from the Old French desport meaning "leisure", alluding to the fact that sport might have been classified as a leisure activity in the old days. In the modern era however, sport

can be undertaken on an amateur, professional or semi-professional basis, depending on whether participants are incentivised for participation (usually through payment of a wage or salary). Both amateur and professional sports attract spectators, both in person at the sport venue, and through broadcast mediums including radio, television and internet broadcast. This has led to the specific phenomenon of spectator sport.

Sport is a major source of entertainment for non-participants, with spectator sports drawing large crowds to venues, and reaching wider audiences through sports broadcasting. The popularity of spectator sport as a recreation for non-participants has led to sport becoming a major business in its own right, and this has incentivised a high paying professional sport culture, where high performing participants can make a very lucrative career out of sport.

Is the desire to improve physical ability and skills or even winning for that matter while providing entertainment to participants and spectators the only benefits we can derive from participating in sport? The answer to this question lies in the definition of sport, 'physical exertion or activity' is one of the key requirements outlined in the definition of sport and is probably the single most important thing we can do for our health. Physical activity or exercise plays an important role in preventive

medicine which focuses on the health of individuals, communities, and defined populations. Its goal is to protect, promote, and maintain health as well as to prevent disease, disability, and death.

Doctor Mike Evans, a preventative medicine specialist recognized by the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) proposes limiting sitting and sleeping to twenty three and a half hours a day with half an hour dedicated to exercise in order to improve your health. A sedentary lifestyle involves irregular or no physical activity and is commonly found in both the developed and developing world. Sedentary activities include sitting, reading, watching television, playing video games, and computer use for much of the day with little or no vigorous physical exercise. A sedentary lifestyle is a risk factor for chronic disease and can contribute to a lot of preventable causes of death. Sitting still may cause premature death; the risk is higher among those that sit still for more than 5 hours per day. People who sit still for more than 4 hours per day have a 40 percent higher risk of premature death than those that sit fewer than 4 hours per day. However, those that exercise at least 4 hours per week are as healthy as those that sit fewer than 4 hours per day. A sedentary lifestyle and lack of physical activity can contribute to or be a risk factor for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease,

diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity just to name a few.

If exercise is medicine for preventing chronic diseases thus prolonging your life, what is the appropriate dosage? You don't have to be a professional athlete or be able to run a marathon in order to lower the risk of premature death. Some literature has shown that ten minutes of walking a day can lower high blood pressure by as much as twelve percent. The most important thing is to be consistent with your exercise and build it up gradually. Some of the things that can help with adherence to an exercise regime is joining a gym or commit to training with a partner so that you are forced to get out of bed or off the couch to go train because someone is waiting for you.

As your fitness levels improve, ten minutes of walking will not suffice anymore. It will just become too easy; the golden rule is to increase the distance or time by ten percent every ten days until you can walk comfortably for half an hour. You may even want to start running at this stage to challenge yourself further.

As the saying goes, "we don't stop playing when we get old but we get old when we stop playing". The idea with using exercise as a treatment of choice for preventive medicine is to invest at least half an hour a day doing some sort of physical activity in order to prolong and improve your quality of life.

References:

"Definition of sport", Sport Accord. <http://www.sportaccord.com/en/members/index>.

