

Get Some Sun, Live Longer

Many people's common "knowledge" about sun exposure is wrong. Entirely avoiding the sun fails to provide long term health benefits many expect. Instead, not getting any time in the sun actually reduces life expectancy and increases the risk of many types of death, at least among women in Sweden. Meanwhile, research now shows that rays and Vitamin D actually protect against many health risks.

In this 20-year study of 1,000 Swedish women, those who never sought through exercise, sunbathing, tanning, or vacations were likely to die younger. Those seeking sun most often lived significantly longer, by anywhere from 0.6 years (50-year old non-smokers) to 2.1 years (60-year old smokers). Notably, no sun decreased life expectancy for non-smokers the same as being a smoker but getting some sun.

These differences appear due to health benefits from sun exposure, which significantly reduced the risk of death from both cardiovascular (CVD) causes and all non-CVD/non-cancer causes. The more sun these ladies received, the better off they were, too. In both these categories the fatalities were less than half as likely for people getting the most sun than for those getting none at all.

The health perks from sun exposure were robust, even when controlling for demographic and lifestyle factors. Even when accounting separately for (self-reported) exercise, occasional sun time reduced overall death risk 20%, while regular sun reduced it 30%. Thus, while some of the benefits are likely from the activity, fun, and relaxation, that come from seeking sun, but a good portion must be from the Vitamin D that sunlight produces. In fact, these solar benefits lowered death risks more than high education or income, though less than nonsmoking or exercising a lot.

The obvious drawback of much sun is potential skin cancer, but the overall benefits far outweighed the risks. These with more sun exposure did have slight rises in cancer rates. A higher portion of deaths in that group did stem from cancer. But only because the women lived longer and had fewer other health problems, giving them time to get cancer. And the sun getters actually had slightly lower risks of cancer deaths at any given age, because the sun made internal cancers less deadly.

Editorial: Striking and important, yes, but this research, must be applied carefully. On one hand, complete sun avoidance is clearly bad for people. Getting some rays almost certainly has protective effects. This solidifies previous evidence of Vitamin D having isolated benefits on cardiovascular and immune systems. So get out and get some sun! But do not overdo it, either. Too much UV exposure is still certainly unhealthy. Sun is more intense and dangerous at latitudes lower than Sweden. Anywhere, too much sun is very possibly harmful because it can cause melanoma, even with the strongest sunblock. So, catch those rays regularly, but in moderation.

Bibliography

Avoidance of sun exposure as a risk factor for major causes of death: a competing risk analysis of the Melanoma in Southern Sweden cohort, P. G. Lindqvist, E. Epstein, K. Nielsen, M. Landin-Olsson, C. Ingvar & H. Olsson, Journal of Internal Medicine, Volume 276, Issue 1, pages 77–86, July 2014