

Study: Exercise as good as drugs to fight heart disease

By Makiko Kitamura, Bloomberg

Physical activity may be as effective as drugs in treating heart disease and should be included as a comparison in the development of new medicines, according to a review published this month in the British Medical Journal.

No statistically detectable differences were evident between exercise and drug treatment for patients with coronary heart disease or prediabetes, and exercise was more effective among patients recovering from a stroke, according to a review of 16 meta-analyses that included 305 studies involving 339,274 participants. The review was conducted by researchers at Harvard University and Stanford University.

The analysis adds to evidence showing the benefit of non-medical approaches to disease through behavior and lifestyle changes. Given the cost of drug treatment, regulators should consider requiring pharmaceutical companies to include exercise as a comparator in clinical trials of new medicines, according to authors Huseyin Naci of Harvard and John Ioannidis of Stanford.

“In cases where drug options provide only modest benefit, patients deserve to understand the relative impact that physical activity have on their condition,” Naci and Ioannidis said in the published paper. In the meantime, “exercise interventions should therefore be considered as a viable alternative to, or, alongside, drug therapy.”

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