



e-quilibrium

- *“electronic briefs on behavior and health”*

Volume 6, Number 8
August 2010

Television

“Did you watch _____ on TV last night?” Does the answer to that question have any health implications?

Perhaps most of us would share a general belief that television viewing has no specific health benefits, and at a minimum is indirectly harmful to health because we associate it with being sedentary. Much research has been done on television viewing as it is a very quantifiable behavior (i.e., hours spent in front of a screen).

Television viewing is indeed one of the most commonly used measures for sedentary behavior. The assumption is that the more one watches television, the less physical activity that individual is getting. There is research evidence that greater amounts of television viewing time are associated with more obesity and other metabolic disorders, as well as cardiovascular disease. It has been found that weight loss maintainers (those who have lost weight and kept it off) have fewer TVs in their homes compared to overweight individuals who haven't lost weight. However, as is the case with any correlation, one cannot simply draw conclusions about which comes first. Curiously, a study was recently published indicating that TV viewing was linked to death from heart disease, but that relationship was unrelated to levels of physical activity. Further complicating matters, the relationship between television viewing time and metabolic disorders is greater for women than for men. And what about watching TV while using exercise equipment... that would seem to be healthy!

In children, excessive television viewing is not only believed to contribute to weight problems but also cognitive problems, such as attention disorders. Here are conclusions from three recent articles published in the journal Pediatrics:

- TV viewing (and computer game exposure) in young children negatively affects children's sleep, learning, and memory.
- TV viewing in infancy is unrelated to language or visual/ motor skills at age 3.
- More psychological distress is present in children (ages 4-12) who watch more TV and get less physical activity.

Additionally, a recent study published in Child Development reports no association between TV viewing at ages 1-3 and attention problems at age 7. What are parents to conclude?

There is strong evidence that time spent in leisure activities is good for health, ostensibly because leisure time may help protect against the negative affects of stress. Many leisure activities involve more mental or physical engagement than is required with television viewing, but lots of people would consider watching television to be a leisure activity. A recent study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine concluded that leisure time spent in television viewing or "screen-based entertainment" was associated with poorer mental health. It is known that older adults watch more television than younger adults; data have been reported that older adults enjoy television viewing less, perhaps because it doesn't function so much as a stress-reliever as it does for younger adults (which actually implies a stress-reduction benefit of television viewing for younger adults). From another perspective, a recent Swedish study described how television viewing by older adults in nursing homes had the benefits of helping structure daily life, and facilitating social integration (when watching TV with others).

So far in this discussion I've said nothing about the content of what one watches on television. It is known that watching violence on television or in video games can influence perceptions of how safe one's community is, as well as subsequent aggressive behavior. Certainly advertising affects consumer behavior. Television content can also be educational, and public health campaigns would be an example of this.

Confused? Obviously television viewing in and of itself cannot be dismissed as unhealthy. As is the case with many areas of human behavior, benefits or risks to health from a behavior pattern are often difficult to ascertain. However, watching television, especially an excessive amount, certainly can be unhealthy when it interferes with or replaces other healthy behaviors, such as physical activity or positive social interactions. Whether or not watching _____ on television last night was healthy for you depends upon numerous other factors. Did it help you relax? Did it interfere with (or facilitate) interaction with significant other people in your life? Were you exercising at the time? Did it help you sleep? For how long did you watch? What did you learn? Did you laugh? What, if anything, were you eating or drinking while watching?

Perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from the array of available research is that the key is balance. While excessive television viewing may well be a marker for the absence of other healthy behaviors (for most people), in the context of an otherwise healthy lifestyle, spending a limited amount of time watching television likely carries no substantial health risks.

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