



## Ask the Expert with Dr. Darrell Menard

*Find Answers to your Sport Medicine Questions!*

# Preventing a Pandemic of Health Problems

**Q:** *As a result of COVID19, my husband has spent the last 6 months working from home and during that time he has definitely been less physically active. He no longer has access to a gym, noon hour fitness classes, team sports or partners to exercise with. I am concerned that his being less active will increase his risk of illness and injury in the future. Am I stressing for nothing? Worried Wendy*

**A:** Dear Worried Wendy: studies have shown that the restrictions placed on Canadians during the COVID19 pandemic have resulted in a significant reduction in our physical activity levels. In some countries, workers report they are sitting 75 minutes more during their work day. In addition to sitting more, Canadians who work from home are not benefitting from the exercise they used to get walking to and from work and walking at their place of work. This may not sound like a big deal but this decrease in physical activity starts to add up and the following are some of the unwanted side effects:

1. Over time, reduced physical activity can result in weight gain and this can have many unwanted consequences including an increased risk of developing diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.
2. Sitting is now recognized as a health risk factor and anything that increases the amount of time you spend sitting is undesirable.
3. We are designed to move and being inactive reduces the strength of our core, arm and legs muscles. These changes not only make it harder to do things such as mowing the lawn but they also increase the risk of musculoskeletal injuries such as rotator cuff tears.
4. Even short periods of inactivity have been shown to make it challenging for some people to resume regular exercising – in essence we can learn to be couch potatoes.
5. Social isolation and physical inactivity are a bad combination when it comes to mental health. Research has shown that regular physical activity can play an important role in the prevention and treatment of mental health disorders such as depression, PTSD and anxiety.
6. Your heart is a muscle and it depends on you being physically active to function efficiently.
7. The immune system functions better when you are physically active and during the pandemic this could potentially be a lifesaving benefit.

Staying active during this pandemic doesn't need to be complicated. It could be as simple as walking, jogging or cycling for 30 minutes 5 times/wk. Try taking the kids and your dog with you – they need the exercise just as much as you do. If you are having trouble finding the time to exercise why not use the time you save not having to commute to and from work.

Bottom line: The COVID19 pandemic has placed enormous stress on Canada's health care system. The last thing we need right now is to increase this burden with a "pandemic" of health problems related to being less physically active. Stay active, stay safe and we will get through this.

### **Dr. Darrell Menard MD Dip Sport Med**

Dr. Darrell Menard is the Surgeon General's specialist advisor in sport medicine. He has worked extensively with athletes from multiple sports and has covered Canadian teams competing at multiple games including the 2012 Olympics and the 2016 Paralympic games. These articles were originally published in the Canadian Forces Journal, the Maple Leaf.

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