



Ask the Expert with Dr. Darrell Menard

Find Answers to your Sport Medicine Questions!

Dealing with my COVID “19”

Q: I have worked from home for over a year because of the pandemic. In addition, I have limited my travelling to essential things like medical appointments and grocery shopping. Something I have not changed is my exercise routine which involves a combination of running, cycling and weights. Despite this, I have somehow put on 10 unwanted pounds. If the pandemic lasts another year, I could end up 19 pounds heavier than I want to be. Any idea why I’m gaining weight and any suggestions on how to avoid putting on a COVID “19”? *Annoyed Alex.*

A: Dear Annoyed Alex – congratulations on maintaining your fitness program during the pandemic. Unfortunately, weight gain during this pandemic is a common and concerning experience that could have long term negative consequences for people’s health. This pandemic related weight gain can be related to multiple factors such as:

1. Lack of access to exercise facilities and equipment;
2. Limited time to exercise because of additional responsibilities such as home schooling and child care;
3. Loss of motivation as the pandemic drags on and people get discouraged;
4. Lack of exercise partners – challenging for people who prefer to stay fit playing team sports;
5. Decreased competitive opportunities – competition can be a powerful motivator to exercise; and
6. A reduction in people’s daily volume of low level activity.

This last factor is ambushing many people like yourself who have faithfully continued their normal exercise routine and find themselves gaining weight. Research shows that during the pandemic, many people are sitting an average of 75 minutes more per day. This loss of low intensity physical activity can add up to a lot of unburned calories especially when it occurs for a prolonged period of time. The problem is, this reduction in activity level is so minor many people don’t realize it is happening.

Now that you know this loss of low level physical activity is occurring and important, here are some strategies you can use to avoid developing your COVID “19”:

1. Increase the amount of time you spend exercising;
2. Reduce your calorie intake;
3. Try doing things the hard way – turn off your dishwasher, park your riding lawnmower, shelve your Roomba, etc.;
4. Increase the low level physical activity in your day – do more house and yard work, walk your dog farther than you normally do, use a bike to do local errands, plan activity adventures with your children, etc.;
5. Regularly get up from your work station and move around your home; and
6. Use a ‘wearable’ device (i.e. Fitbit, Apple watch, etc.) to remind yourself how much you have or have not moved during your workday.

The bottom line: the pandemic has reduced the amount of low level physical activity in many people’s lives and this can lead to unwanted weight gain and future health problems. Now that you know this is happening, try the above “Get More Active” strategies to help you avoid gaining your own COVID “19”. Movement is medicine!

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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