

## When Exercise is not Exercise

### *The Fidget Factor*

By Simon Evans

One of the biggest reasons we are getting so fat is no secret, we eat more calories than we burn. For example, if you take in 2000 calories a day and you only burn or excrete 1900 then you have a net increase of about 100 calories per day, which translates to about 10lbs of increased body weight per year. Do this year after year and you find yourself 50lbs overweight in just a few years.

### **There are three main ways that we burn calories.**

First, is our basal metabolic rate (called BMR). These are the calories that we burn just lying still. The calories we burn just breathing, pumping blood around and basic physiology. In individuals that have a sedentary occupation and don't exercise much, this accounts for most of the calories burned.

Second, are the calories burned from eating and digesting food. These are called TEF or Thermic Effect of Food. This accounts for about 10-15% of total daily calories burned by most people.

Third, are the calories burned by physical activity. Most people think of these as the calories burned by the amount of exercise that you get. There are all kinds of formulas to calculate how many calories you burn while exercising and most exercise equipment can do this for you.

### **Activity is not always as it appears.**

However, there is another form of calorie burning from physical activity that is under appreciated. These are the calories burned from NEAT, which stands for Non Exercise Activity Thermogenesis. Kind of a mouthful, so let's just stick with NEAT. Researchers at the Mayo Clinic are heading up much of the NEAT studies, but it is catching on elsewhere

as well. In fact, one of my colleagues at the University of Michigan is working with the Mayo people to study NEAT in a pre-diabetic rat model that we are studying.

NEAT is essentially the energy that you burn just by moving around. If you have a job that keeps you active then this will account for much of your NEAT. But tapping your fingers, shifting your chair, bouncing your leg, etc. all add up to some calorie burn as well.

### **Benefits of Fidgeting**

Some folks, like me, are very fidgety – when I was little my parents always told me to stop fidgeting so much. Other people sit motionless much of the time. These 'innate' behaviors account for a lot of calorie burn.

It turns out, according to estimates from the researchers, that fidgeting can actually differ by a couple of hundred calories per day between fidgeters and still people. If you think about that in terms of weight gain, that can add up to 10-20 lbs. per year. That's a huge difference and may be one of the reasons that some people just don't gain as much weight as others, even when they seem to eat and exercise about the same amount.

This does not mean that if you are a fidgeter and seem to be protected against weight gain that you do not need to exercise. The benefits of getting your heart rate up go far beyond burning calories and losing weight. Exercise also contributes to cardiovascular strength, muscle tone and even brain function, as I have discussed in the past.

### **NEAT things to do**

Fidgeting is not likely something that you can adopt if you are not a fidgety person. It seems to be programmed in. However, you can do a lot of things to increase your level of



NEAT and burn a few more calories every day, which can add up to big effects.

**Here are a few suggestions:**

- Stand up and walk around when you talk on the phone instead of sitting at your desk or on the couch.
- Don't sit in your chair for more than 15 minutes without standing up and stretching a little.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Park farther away from the store and spend two extra minutes walking instead of two extra minutes driving around looking for the closest spot to the door.

- Park a block away from work or get off the bus a block early.

These are all simple things that don't seem like much but when you think about these in terms of cutting 10-20 lbs per year off your waistline, it should be worth it.

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