

Interactive Video Games Offer Exercise Benefits

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FRIDAY, June 5 (HealthDay News) -- Couch potatoes beware: If you start playing a new generation of video games that require users to get up and move around, you may find yourself getting a bit more fit.

New research suggests that several exercise-based Nintendo Wii video games provide health benefits, in one case equal to that of light jogging.

And seniors in Florida managed to raise their heart rates by playing a video-game version of bowling. Many managed to have a good time and even engage in some "trash talk" about who was better, the researchers said.

Exercise-via-video-game might not replace the value of traditional methods of getting fit, said Elizabeth DiRico, an exercise physiologist who studied college students who played Wii athletic games. Still, "if you have an unfit individual, this would be a good way to transition them from being a couch potato into moving more," she said.

Playing a video game has traditionally been a sedentary activity, requiring users to do little more than stand or sit and manipulate a joystick. But many new video games require players to get up and move about, whether to dance or mimic the movements of real-life athletes.

In the Wii bowling game, for instance, players hold onto a controller device as if it were a bowling ball and try to hit the virtual pins at the end of a lane on the screen. The game doesn't require quite as much physical activity as real-life bowling -- for one, the "ball" doesn't weigh much -- but players do have to move around and perhaps get out of their chairs when it's their turn.

In one of the new studies, researchers asked 44 people in their 60s, 70s and 80s to play the Wii bowling game at a senior center in Pensacola, Fla. The researchers found that the game boosted the heart rate of the participants by about 40 percent, and many reported enjoying the game, said study co-author Lucas A. Willoughby, now a former graduate student at the University of West Florida.

The findings "let us know that the older adults felt more enthusiastic and rejuvenated, in better psychological shape than when they started," he said. "They even felt a little bit younger, like they were kids again."

Some of the seniors found it challenging at first to throw the bowling ball using the controller, but they figured it out, Willoughby said.

"Some were really getting into it. They were recruiting their friends and trying to play tournaments," Willoughby said. They also said things like "I got a strike and you got a gutter ball," he added. "They were trash-talking each other."

In the other study, DiRico and her colleagues monitored the bodies of 13 college students as they played one of three Wii games -- boxing, tennis or aerobics -- for 10 minutes after learning how to play.

The aerobics and tennis games provided light intensity exercise, which may not mean much, especially if a person was already fit, said DiRico, who works for a WellPoint health benefits company fitness center. But the boxing game provided more of an exercise boost, equivalent to a light jog, she said.

Players may find the games more fun and stimulating than other forms of exercise, DiRico said. But the games should be seen as the beginning of an exercise program, not the end point, she said.

The study results were presented last month at the American College of Sports Medicine annual meeting, in Seattle.