



# Slackers, Rejoice:

## Research Touts The Benefits of Skipping Out of Work

By Sue Shellenbarger

With the nation on edge, taking a vacation may be the last thing on your mind. You might want to reconsider.

A growing body of research suggests the American trend toward skipping vacations is hazardous. In a nine-year study of 12,000 middle-age men at risk for coronary disease, researchers found those who failed to take vacations had a higher risk of death from heart disease, than those who took regular vacations. The results were controlled for education, income and the possibility that some of the subjects' health were too poor to take vacations.

A lack of vacations was a predictor of heart attacks and early death among 749 women studied over 20 years, says a landmark study published a decade ago in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*.

Employees of a manufacturing company reported fewer physical complaints for up to five weeks after a two-week vacation, says a study published in 2000 in the journal *Occupational Medicine*.

A couple of years ago, Mark Maloney was deep into talks on a major deal on behalf of his company. With his personal savings at stake, he was having chest pains, a symptom his doctor attributed to stress. Breaking away to get on a plane for a long-scheduled vacation, Mr. Maloney stated it, felt like "career suicide."

It also felt like a cure. His partners closed the deal while he led his son's Boy Scout Troop on a hike in the New Mexican

wilderness. By the time he returned two weeks later, "all the symptoms had disappeared. It was months and months before I noticed it again," says 53-year-old Mr. Maloney, who heads sales and marketing for *eTrauma*, a Deerfield Beach, FL., digital-imaging software company.



Despite such benefits, employee use of vacation time is dropping across the board, says Carol Sladek of *Hewitt Associates*, Lincolnshire, IL. In some cases, she says, "companies are staffed so lean there's no way people can take the time." In others, "people are afraid, if you leave the office and take two weeks, who knows what will happen by the time you get back?"

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Researchers say good vacations have a power that extends beyond the time you're away. Various studies surveyed by Dov Eden at *Tel Aviv University* reveal what is called an **afterglow**, with vacationers reporting **less burnout for three to six weeks** afterward. Sarah Knox, a stress researcher at the *National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute*, says that just as chronic stress tears down the body's ability to calm down from higher blood

pressure and heart rate, vacations may give rise to the opposite dynamic, creating a metabolic rebuilding process.

Vacationers tend to form enduring new habits, such as exercise, says Brooks Gump of *State University of New York*, co-author of the 12,000 man study. Dr. Eden and co-researcher Mina Westman, also of *Tel Aviv University*, suggest vacations enable workers to reverse a loss of personal resources by restoring relationships with family and friends who provide support.

Some research show that breaks from work as short as a day can relieve symptoms of stress. "I've seen people who say, 'I went away for a weekend, and it changed my life,'" says Mel Borins, a physician and author of *Go Away Just for the Health of It*.

To get the biggest bang for your break, a vacation should meet at least one of three criteria: it should have a big enough mental and physical effect on you to create an afterglow; it should inspire you to form healthful new habits; or, it should enable you to shore up ties with family or friends.

The real distance you must travel is mental. Stephen Tock hasn't taken more than a few days off for years but his vacations enable him to truly forget about work. Tock, an attorney and financial planner, enjoys car trips with his family; weekends at a resort also do the trick. When he returns, he has a slower heartbeat, a higher frustration threshold, and an easier time weeding out distractions.

But at the risk of stating the obvious: No working from poolside. Telecommuting while on vacation can foster a stress-magnifying condition Dr. Gump calls "vigilance for threat"—the state of being tensed, like a coiled spring, and scanning the horizon for perils, such as bad feedback or getting fired. In a study, Dr. Gump found that when he subjected students to stress after creating a period of "vigilance for threat," their blood pressure spiked higher than as if they'd been calm. Dr. Knox says, "Often, the threat of stress is as bad as the stress itself."

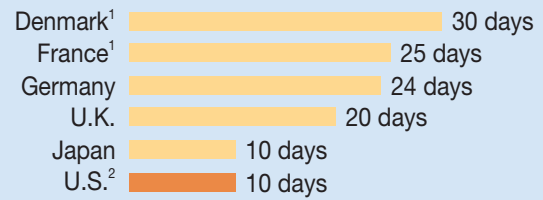
To dream up your perfect vacation, "think back over all the times you've been away. What was your fondest holiday? What was your most transformational vacation? And then try to match that," Dr. Borins advises.

And stay plugged in to your body's warning signs: fatigue, difficulty waking up, irritability, a low frustration threshold, or neck, head or back aches, may signal a vacation need, Dr. Borins says. Two years after his New Mexican hike, Mr. Maloney is still more vigilant. "Now, when I feel that kind of stress coming on, I tone it down and take a vacation."

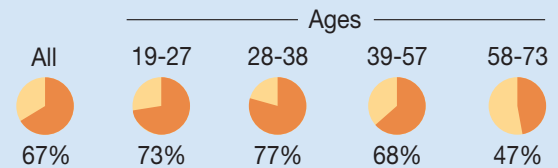
So far this year, he has planned only a few days off because of business pressure, but as he mulls the benefits of his New Mexican getaway, Mr. Maloney says, he just might reconsider 🍷

## The Vacation Gap

Workers in the U.S. get less vacation than in most other countries. (Vacation time mandated for workers after one year of service with an employer.)



But many want time off. (Percent of Americans who say they are in need of a long vacation.)



<sup>1</sup>Based on a six-day workweek <sup>2</sup>No statutory minimum; most employers offer two weeks

Source: Hewitt Associates, Hilton Hotels Generational Time Survey

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