Device-measured physical activity, sedentary time, and risk of all-cause mortality: an individual participant data analysis of four prospective cohort studies

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ABSTRACT

Objectives To examine whether moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) modifies the association between sedentary time and mortality and vice versa, and estimate the joint associations of MVPA and sedentary time on mortality risk.

Methods This study involved individual participant data analysis of four prospective cohort studies (Norway, Sweden, USA, baseline: 2003–2016, 11 989 participants ≥50 years, 50.5% women) with hip-accelerometry-measured physical activity and sedentary time. Associations were examined using restricted cubic splines and fractional polynomials in Cox regressions adjusted for sex, education, body mass index, smoking, alcohol, study cohort, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and/or diabetes, accelerometry wear time and age.

Results 6.7% (n=805) died during follow-up (median 5.2 years, IQR 4.2 years). More than 12 daily sedentary hours (reference 8 hours) was associated with mortality risk only among those accumulating <22 min of MVPA per day (HR 1.38, 95% CI 1.10 to 1.74). Higher MVPA levels were associated with lower mortality risk irrespective of sedentary time, for example, HR for 10 versus 0 daily min of MVPA was 0.85 (95% CI 0.74 to 0.96) in those accumulating <10.5 daily sedentary hours and 0.65 (95% CI 0.53 to 0.79) in those accumulating ≥10.5 daily sedentary hours. Joint association analyses confirmed that higher MVPA was superior to lower sedentary time in lowering mortality risk, for example, 10 versus 0 daily min of MVPA was associated with 28–55% lower mortality risk across the sedentary time spectrum (lowest risk, 10 daily sedentary hours: HR 0.45, 95% CI 0.31 to 0.65).

Conclusions Sedentary time was associated with higher mortality risk but only in individuals accumulating less than 22 min of MVPA per day. Higher MVPA levels were associated with lower mortality risk irrespective of the amount of sedentary time.

WHAT ARE THE FINDINGS

⇒ In this individual participant data analysis of four prospective cohort studies of adults aged 50 years and older with use of continuous data on physical activity, being sedentary more than 12 hours per day was associated with 38% higher mortality risk, but only among individuals accumulating less than 22 min per day of MVPA.

⇒ Higher levels of MVPA were associated with lower mortality risk irrespective of sedentary time, for example, 10 min higher MVPA per day were associated with 15% and 35% lower mortality risk in those being less and highly sedentary, respectively.

HOW MIGHT IT IMPACT ON CLINICAL PRACTICE IN THE FUTURE

⇒ Small amounts of MVPA may be an effective strategy to ameliorate the mortality risk from high sedentary time, where accumulating more than 22 min of MVPA eliminates the risk of high sedentary time.

INTRODUCTION

In western countries, adults spend an average of ~9 to 10 hours per day being sedentary,[1–3] mostly during working hours.[4–7] As higher sedentary time is associated with higher risk of non-communicable diseases and mortality,[8–11] preventive measures are important.

Previous studies have shown that moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) and sedentary time can be combined differently to lower mortality risks.[12–16] Accumulating small amounts of MVPA may attenuate risks associated with high sedentary time, while higher amounts of MVPA (40–60 min per day) appear to eliminate risks from sedentary time.[12–16] Consequently, the recently updated World Health Organization (WHO) physical activity guidelines recommend individuals who are highly sedentary to engage in more than 300 min of MVPA per week.[17] Moreover, light physical activity and total volume of physical activity are also associated with lower mortality risk.[11 18]

Previous meta-analyses examining associations between physical activity, sedentary time, and mortality are based on harmonised approaches, where individual data are harmonised at study level and aggregated data are thereafter meta-analysed.[12–15] In contrast, individual participant data analyses involve re-analysis of original data as one single study,[19] which offers high flexibility to detect

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exposure-outcome associations and their interactions.[19 20] This may also overcome limitations of arbitrary categorisations from aggregated summary data.[21] For example, in a recent harmonised meta-analysis, median MVPA ranged from 23 to 63 min per day in the most active category of the included cohorts.[11] Such large variations between categories may lead to loss of information[21] and challenge translation to absolute physical activity targets for public health and clinical decision-making.

We pooled individual participant data from four prospective cohorts with device-measured physical activity in a one-step individual participant data analysis to allow the use of a continuous data form, and aimed to examine (1) whether the association between sedentary time and mortality is modified by physical activity and vice versa (whether the association between physical activity and mortality is modified by sedentary time), and (2) joint associations of MVPA and sedentary time on mortality risk.

METHODS
Individual participant data from four prospective cohorts from Norway, Sweden, and the USA were pooled. Baseline data were collected between 2003 and 2019: Tromsø Study 2015–2016[22 23]; Healthy Ageing Initiative (HAI) 2012–2019[24]; Norwegian National Physical Activity Survey (NNPAS) 2008–2009[25]; and National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) 2003–2006.[26 27] These cohorts were included due to availability of individual participant data (NHANES data are freely available online), and hip-worn accelerometry, which enables harmonisation of data. Cohort descriptions are summarised in online supplemental file 1. We included individuals aged ≥50 years, with ≥4 days of 10 hours with valid accelerometry data,[28] ≥2 years follow-up time, and information on sex, educational level, weight, height, smoking, alcohol intake, and prevalent and/or previous cardiovascular disease (CVD), cancer and/or diabetes.

Mortality
Data on mortality was linked with the Norwegian and Swedish cause of death registries, and the United States National Death Index, through 31 December 2020 (Tromsø Study), 31 December 2017 (NNPAS), 31 December 2019 (HAI), and 31 December 2015 (NHANES), respectively.

Device-measured physical activity
All cohorts used ActiGraph accelerometers (ActiGraph, Pensacola, Florida, USA) placed at the hip (NHANES: AM-7164; NNPAS: GT1M; HAI: GT3X+; Tromsø Study: wGT3X-BT) (online supplemental file S2). We analysed accelerometry data using KineSoft version 3.3.80 (Kinesoft, Loughborough, UK). We removed data between 00:00 and 06:00 and, for harmonisation purposes, only considered data from the vertical axis. Nonwear time was defined as 60 consecutive min of zero counts with allowance for up to 2 min of non-zero counts over 100 counts per min.[29]

Total physical activity was defined as counts per min divided by wear time,[30] and volume of intensity-specific physical activity as follows: sedentary <100 counts per min,[31] light physical activity 100–2019 counts per min,[25] and MVPA ≥2020 counts per min.[29] The MVPA threshold was calibrated as an average from four validity protocols against indirect calorimetry during walking and running,[32–35] and the estimates of total physical activity and MVPA are reasonably well correlated with physical activity energy expenditure estimated using doubly labelled water during free-living conditions (ρ=0.37–0.51).[30] As wear time differed across cohorts, we standardised all exposure variables to 16 hours wear time per day, for example (MVPA per day/wear time per day)×16.

Covariates
Covariates (sex, age, education (primary, high school, lower university, higher university), body mass index (BMI, <25, 25–29, ≥30 kg/m^2), smoking (current, previous, never), alcohol intake (units per week), history of CVD, cancer and diabetes) were chosen a priori according to previous literature,[11 24 26 36–39] illustrated in a directed acyclic graph (online supplemental figure S1). History of CVD, cancer and diabetes were self-reported or obtained from national registries (HAI). Measurements and harmonisation of covariates are described in online supplemental file S3–S4 and table S1.

Statistical analyses
First, we performed Cox regressions to examine the association between physical activity and sedentary time with mortality using restricted cubic splines, adjusted for sex, education, BMI, smoking, alcohol intake, study cohort, CVD/cancer/diabetes, age (in years) as timescale,[40] and additional mutual adjustment of physical activity and sedentary time.[11] To avoid influence of extreme values, data outside the 1st and 99th percentile of exposure distributions were replaced with their respective 1st and 99th percentile values. The NHANES does not provide information on attendance or death date (only follow-up time to censoring, death or study end); therefore, we set the attendance date to 1 January 2004 (wave 2003–2004) and 1 January 2006 (wave 2005–2006), and calculated the death date, censoring (emigration) by addition of follow-up time. Participants' study entry was set 2 years after attendance (left-truncation) and followed to death, censoring (lost-to-follow-up) or study end.

We thereafter stratified analyses to examine dose–response associations between physical activity and mortality within strata of sedentary time, based on restricted cubic splines, and with sedentary time and mortality within strata of MVPA. We split sedentary time by full-sample median as 'low' (<10.5 hours·day^{-1}) and 'high' (≥10.5 hours·day^{-1}). Similarly, MVPA was split at median 22 min of MVPA per day. Knots in cubic splines were placed at the 10th, 50th and 90th percentiles of the analysis-specific distributions (eg, dose–response association for MVPA and knot placements estimated separately within low and high sedentary time). Changing knot locations or increasing knot numbers did not change the results. The reference of the spline was 0 min per day for MVPA[11] and 8 hours per day for sedentary time.[41] For light and total physical activity, we used the 10th percentile of the split sample-specific distribution because no quantitative thresholds are established for these variables.

To keep the continuous data form and to handle the nonlinear associations observed in spline models in the joint analyses of MVPA and sedentary time with mortality, we used fractional polynomials to identify the best fit Cox regression model. As light physical activity and sedentary time were highly correlated (r=−0.96) and total physical activity includes sedentary time (<100 counts per min), we did not examine the joint associations of light or total physical activity with sedentary time.

We applied the following sensitivity analyses: (1) excluding the first 5 years of follow-up after study attendance to limit reverse causation bias; (2) median split sedentary time separately by the Norwegian and Swedish (Tromsø, HAI and NNPAS) and US (NHANES) cohorts to evaluate demographic region differences;

(3) accounting for non-identical output between AM-7164 and GT3X accelerometers by calibrating individual-level summary data in the NHANES[42] (as described in online supplemental table S8).

Schoenfeld's residuals tests confirmed no violated proportional hazards for all covariates (all $p \geq 0.08$), except possibly education in low sedentary participants ($p = 0.02$). However, log-log survival plots of education displayed reasonable parallel lines indicating no violated proportional hazards. Statistical analyses were performed using Stata version 17.0 (StataCorp LLC, TX, USA) with α set to 0.05.

Equity, diversity, and inclusion statement

Our study included cohort studies of high participation rates (Tromsø: 65% of all over 40 years in Tromsø municipality, Norway; HAI: 70% of all over 70 years in Västerbotten, Sweden) or national representative cohorts (NNPAS: randomly drawn by Statistics Norway, 36% participation; NHANES: oversampling of African American, Hispanics and those over 60 years), and sample-weights to yield national representative estimates (only used in the NHANES analysis due to the individual participant data approach). The Tromsø Study is situated above the Arctic Circle (ie, the Far North) and constitutes 40% of the total sample size (online supplemental file 1, table S2). The cohort studies recruited participants from all socioeconomic levels (online supplemental table S2, table 1). The author team includes both women and men, from multiple countries in Europe, and junior and senior researchers within physical activity, epidemiology, statistics, and medicine. Some of the authors have indigenous backgrounds, and many authors are affiliated with the northernmost university in the world (UiT The Arctic University of Norway). We did not consider equity, socioeconomic disadvantage, or inequities in marginalised communities in the analysis or interpretation of results as we considered this outside the scope of this study's aims. We examined geographical differences by performing separate analyses by the Norwegian and Swedish cohorts and the NHANES.

RESULTS

In total, 805 (6.7%) of the 11 989 participants died during follow-up (median 5.2 years, IQR 4.2 years) (table 1). The NHANES cohort had the longest follow-up time and contributed with 65% of total deaths (online supplemental table S2). The ranges of physical activity and sedentary time were similar among cohorts (online supplemental figures S2–5). A flow chart of participant inclusion is found in online supplemental figure S6.

Wald tests confirmed departure from linearity in all models (all $p < 0.001$). We observed two-way interactions between all physical activity estimates and sedentary time ($p < 0.001$), but no interactions between physical activity or sedentary time and any covariates (all $p > 0.07$). In analyses stratified by <10.5 (low) and ≥ 10.5 (high) sedentary hours per day, MVPA was curvilinearly associated with mortality risk with a steeper dose–response curve among participants with high compared with low sedentary time (figure 1A). For example, compared with 0 min per day, 10 min of MVPA were associated with 15% (HR 0.85, 95% CI 0.74 to 0.96) and 35% (HR 0.65, 95% CI 0.53 to 0.79) lower mortality risk among those with <10.5 and ≥ 10.5 sedentary hours per day, respectively.

Among participants accumulating ≥ 22 min of MVPA per day, sedentary time was not associated with mortality (12 hours·day^{-1}: HR 1.08, 95% CI 0.66 to 1.77) compared with

Table 1 Descriptive characteristics of the participants

		Sedentary time	
	All	<10.5 hours·day^{-1}	≥ 10.5 hours·day^{-1}
Total (N)	11 989	5943	6042
Dead, n (%)	805 (6.7)	357 (6.0)	448 (7.4)
Follow-up time (years)			
Median (25-75th percentile)	5.24 (4.66–8.85)	5.53 (4.70–9.25)	5.10 (4.64–5.94)
Min-max	2.02–13.08	2.02–13.08	2.03–13.08
Sex			
Women, n (%)	6057 (50.5)	3187 (53.6)	2870 (47.5)
Men, n (%)	5932 (49.5)	2756 (46.4)	3176 (52.5)
Age (mean±SD)	66.7±7.6	65.5±7.6	67.9±7.4
50–59 years, n (%)	2595 (21.6)	1571 (26.4)	1024 (16.9)
60–69 years, n (%)	3363 (28.1)	1691 (28.5)	1672 (27.7)
70–79 years, n (%)	5607 (46.8)	2551 (42.9)	3056 (50.6)
≥ 80 years, n (%)	424 (3.5)	130 (2.2)	294 (4.9)
Birth year			
<1940, n (%)	1925 (16.1)	881 (14.8)	1044 (17.3)
1940–49, n (%)	6591 (55.0)	3232 (54.4)	3359 (55.6)
≥ 1950, n (%)	3473 (28.9)	1830 (30.8)	1643 (27.2)
BMI (mean±SD)	27.0±4.5	26.6±4.4	27.4±4.7
<25 kg/m^2, n (%)	4203 (35.1)	2254 (37.9)	1949 (32.2)
25–29 kg/m^2, n (%)	5218 (43.5)	2600 (43.8)	2618 (43.3)
≥ 30 kg/m^2, n (%)	2568 (21.4)	1089 (18.3)	1479 (24.5)
Smoking			
Current smoker, n (%)	1434 (11.9)	696 (11.7)	738 (12.2)
Previous smoker, n (%)	5584 (46.6)	2646 (44.5)	2938 (48.6)
Never smoker, n (%)	4971 (41.5)	2601 (43.8)	2370 (39.2)
Education			
Primary school, n (%)	3035 (25.3)	1506 (25.3)	1529 (25.3)
High school, n (%)	3883 (32.4)	1941 (32.7)	1942 (32.1)
University some, n (%)	2722 (22.7)	1443 (24.3)	1279 (21.2)
University long, n (%)	2349 (19.6)	1053 (17.7)	1296 (21.4)
Alcohol intake (mean±SD)	2.3±3.2	2.1±3.0	2.6±3.4
Never, n (%)	1720 (14.3)	913 (15.4)	807 (13.4)
<1.99 units·week^{-1}, n (%)	5921 (49.4)	3044 (51.2)	2877 (47.6)
≥ 2 units·week^{-1}, n (%)	4348 (36.3)	1986 (33.4)	2362 (39.0)
Disease, n (%)	6179 (51.5)	2757 (46.7)	3442 (57.1)
CVD, n (%)	1858 (15.5)	710 (12.0)	1148 (19.0)
Cancer, n (%)	1982 (16.5)	912 (15.4)	1070 (17.7)
Diabetes, n (%)	1032 (8.6)	417 (7.0)	615 (10.2)
Hypertension, n (%)	3722 (31.1)	1633 (27.7)	2089 (34.9)
Physical activity			
Wear time (hours·days^{-1})*			
Mean±SD	14.90±1.60	14.88±1.58	14.92±1.63
Total physical activity (counts·min^{-1})			
Mean±SD	300.6±140.4	377.5±131.7	224.8±102.4
Sedentary time (hours·day^{-1})			
Mean±SD	10.35±1.50	9.15±1.04	11.53±0.76
Light physical activity (min·day^{-1})			
Mean±SD	306.9±84.4	371.1±65.4	243.7±43.5
MVPA (min·day^{-1})			
Mean±SD	28.7±24.7	35.2±26.6	22.2±20.8

Data are shown as mean±SD, or as frequency (%).
*Wear time is displayed before standardising the physical activity and sedentary time estimates to 16 hours·day^{-1}.
CVD, cardiovascular disease; MVPA, moderate and vigorous physical activity; BMI, body mass index.
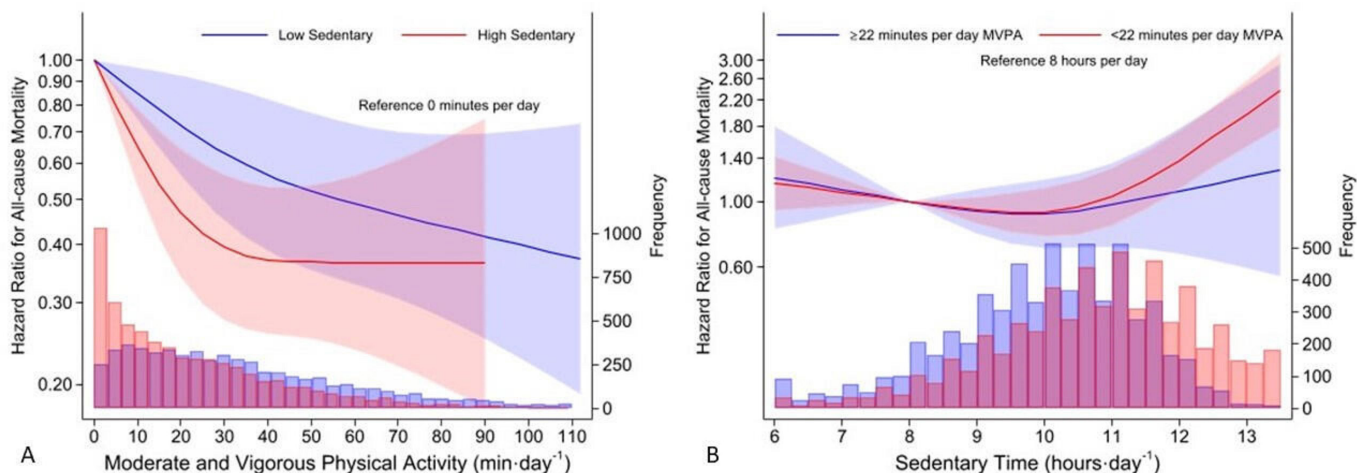
Figure 1 Restricted cubic spline regressions of HR (solid line) and 95% CI (transparent area) with higher (A) MVPA stratified by <10.5 (blue) and ≥10.5 (red) hours per day of sedentary time, and (B) sedentary time stratified by ≥22 (blue) and <22 (red) min of MVPA per day. Knots are placed at the 10th, 50th and 90th percentile of the distributions, separately (A) at <10.5 and ≥10.5 hours·day^{-1} of sedentary time and (B) at ≥22 and <22 min of MVPA per day. Reference of both strata are set to (A) 0 min per day and (B) 8 hours per day. Data are adjusted for sex, education, BMI, smoking, alcohol intake, study cohort, history of CVD, cancer and/or diabetes, and age (in years) as timescale. Accelerometry wear time is adjusted by standardising all physical activity estimates to 16 hours wear time per day. MVPA and sedentary time are winsorized to the 1st and 99th percentile of their non-stratified distribution, BMI, body mass index; CVD, cardiovascular disease; MVPA, moderate-and-vigorous physical activity.

8 hours per day reference (figure 1B). Among participants accumulating <22 min of MVPA per day, sedentary time was curvilinearly associated with mortality. For example, more than 12 hours per day spent sedentary was associated with higher mortality risk (12 hours·day^{-1}, HR 1.38, 95% CI 1.10 to 1.74; 13 hours·day^{-1}, HR 1.98, 95% CI 1.53 to 2.57) compared with 8 hours per day (figure 1B).

For joint associations combining MVPA and sedentary time, the best fit fractional polynomial model included log(MVPA), sedentary time raised to power of 3 (sedentary time^3), and 'log(-sedentary time)*sedentary time^3', and we included the main effect of these transformed variables along with two-way cross products of log(MVPA) with each transformed term of sedentary time. This model was different from a model including linear continuous interaction of 'MVPA*sedentary time' with their main effects (likelihood ratio p<0.001). Joint associations confirmed results from stratified analyses. Higher MVPA was associated with lower mortality risk irrespective of the amounts of sedentary time, whereas the association between sedentary time and mortality was largely influenced by MVPA levels (figure 2, online supplemental table S5). Compared with keeping MVPA constant at 0 min and 8 hours of daily sedentary time as reference, being sedentary 6 hours per day was associated with 56% higher mortality risk (HR 1.56, 95% CI 1.01 to 2.39), while more than 8 hours of sedentary time displayed overlapping CIs, even at 13 hours per day (HR 1.35, 95% CI 0.81 to 2.24) (figure 2, online supplemental table S5). Ten min of MVPA per day were associated with 32% (HR 0.68, 95% CI 0.49 to 0.95) lower mortality risk at 6 hours, 55% (HR 0.45, 95% CI 0.31 to 0.65) lower risk at 10 hours, and 28% (HR 0.72, 95% CI 0.65 to 0.81) lower risk at 13 hours per day of sedentary time (figure 2, online supplemental table S3).

Light physical activity was curvilinearly associated with lower mortality risk but only in highly sedentary participants (figure 3A). Compared with 183 min per day as reference, 15 more min of light physical activity were associated with 11% (HR 0.89, 95% CI 0.85 to 0.95) lower mortality risk, and

maximal risk reduction was observed at 330 min per day (HR 0.61, 95% CI 0.43 to 0.86).

Total physical activity was inversely and curvilinearly associated with mortality risk in both low and high sedentary participants (figure 3B). The lowest mortality risk (HR 0.17, 95% CI 0.08 to 32) in those with low sedentary time was observed at
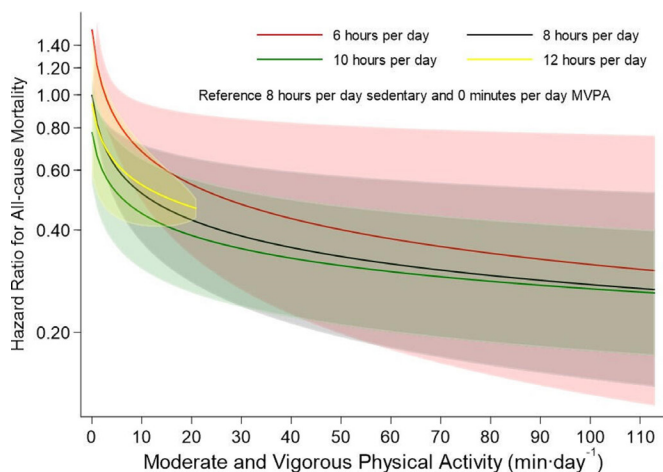

Figure 2 Combined associations modelled as fractional polynomials of sedentary time and MVPA on risk of mortality. HRs are based on a reference of 8 hours per day of sedentary time and 0 min per day of MVPA. Lines are arbitrary shown HR and 95% CI (transparent area): red line=6 hours of sedentary time, black line=8 hours of sedentary time, green line=10 hours of sedentary time, yellow line=12 hours of sedentary time. Data are adjusted for sex, education, BMI, smoking, alcohol intake, study cohort, history of CVD, cancer and/or diabetes, and age (in years) as timescale. Accelerometry wear time is adjusted by standardising all physical activity estimates to 16 hours wear time per day. MVPA and sedentary time are winsorized to the 1st and 99th percentile, BMI, body mass index; CVD, cardiovascular disease; MVPA, moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.
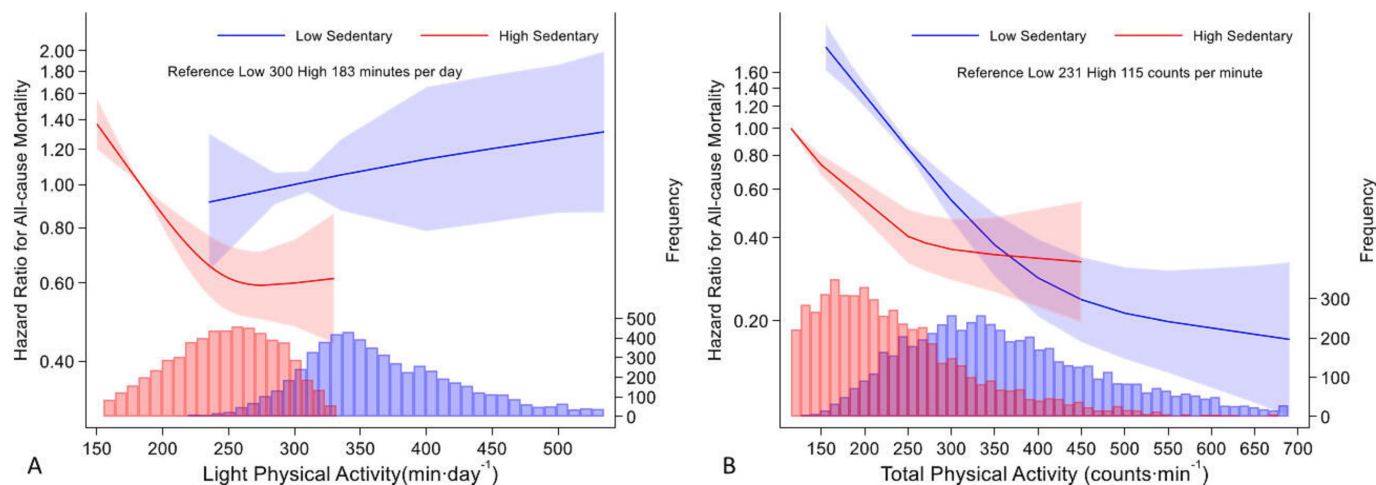
Figure 3 Restricted cubic spline regressions of HR (solid line) and 95% CI (transparent area) with higher (A) light physical activity and (B) total physical activity, stratified by sedentary time (<10.5 hours·day^{-1} (blue) and ≥10.5 hours·day^{-1} (red)). Knots are placed at the 10th, 50th and 90th percentile of the distributions. References are strata-specific 10th percentile: (A) low sedentary: 300 min per day, high sedentary: 183 min per day; (B) low sedentary: 231 counts per min per day, high sedentary: 115 counts per min per day. Data are adjusted for sex, education, BMI, smoking, alcohol intake, study cohort, history of CVD, cancer and/or diabetes, and age (in years) as timescale. Accelerometry wear time is adjusted by standardising all physical activity estimates to 16 hours wear time per day. Light and total physical activity are winsorized to the 1st and 99th percentile of their non-stratified distribution, BMI, body mass index; CVD, cardiovascular disease.

690 counts per min, and in those with high sedentary time at 450 counts per min (HR 0.33, 95% CI 0.20 to 54).

In the analyses with mutual adjustment of physical activity and sedentary time, higher physical activity of all intensities was associated with lower mortality risk (online supplemental table S4). Higher MVPA was curvilinearly associated with lower mortality risk; for example, mortality risk was 27% lower (HR 0.73, 95% CI 0.65 to 0.82) at 10 min of MVPA per day, and 61% lower (HR 0.39, 95% CI 0.30 to 0.51) at 50 min MVPA per day, compared with reference 0 min per day. There was no association between sedentary time and mortality below 11 hours per day; however, we observed a higher risk above 12 sedentary hours per day (12 hours.day^{-1}: HR 1.53, 95% CI 1.27 to 1.84; 13 hours.day^{-1}: HR 2.08, 95% CI 1.65 to 2.62) (online supplemental table S4).

Sensitivity analyses
When excluding the first 5 years of follow-up (n=7266, deaths=463), associations between physical activity and mortality were generally attenuated although in the expected direction (online supplemental table S5). In contrast, the association between sedentary time and mortality was unchanged (online supplemental table S5). In analyses split by Norwegian and Swedish (Tromsø, HAI and NNPAS) and US (NHANES) cohorts, results remained unchanged (online supplemental tables S6 and S7), except among those with <22 min of MVPA per day in the Norwegian and Swedish cohorts, where 9–11 hours per day of sedentary time was associated with lower mortality risk, but with higher risk at 12–13 hours per day (online supplemental table S6). When calibrating NHANES estimates to newer Acti-Graph accelerometers, results were unchanged compared with the main analyses (online supplemental table S8).

DISCUSSION
In this individual participant data analysis from four prospective cohort studies with device-measured physical activity, higher levels of MVPA were associated with lower mortality risk irrespective of the amounts of sedentary time. In contrast, higher sedentary time was only associated with mortality risk in participants with low levels of MVPA. Accumulating at least 22 min per day of MVPA eliminated the association between sedentary time and mortality. Total physical activity was associated with lower mortality risk both in individuals below and above median sedentary time, while light intensity physical activity was only associated with mortality risk in highly sedentary individuals.

These results suggest that although many adults spend most of the day being sedentary,[1–3] performing low amounts of MVPA and even light physical activity may lower their risk of mortality. The recent updated WHO guidelines suggest aiming for the upper limit of 300 min per week of MVPA for those who are highly sedentary,[17] while this study suggests accumulating 22 min per day of MVPA; this can be regarded as equivalent to meeting the lower limit physical activity guideline (>150 min per week, equivalent to 22 min per day over 7 days). However, this interpretation depends on the definitions of MVPA thresholds in accelerometry data.

In non-stratified analyses, higher physical activity was associated with lower mortality risk, and higher sedentary time was associated with higher mortality risk. This is consistent with previous studies examining associations between device-measured physical activity[11 24 26 36–38] and sedentary time[11 24 26 36 43] with mortality. However, we observed effect modifications by sedentary time, which have been indicated by previous meta-analyses examining joint associations of physical activity and sedentary time with mortality,[12–16 44] but not formally tested. Although those with higher sedentary time yielded greater relative benefits from an equivalent amount of MVPA compared with less sedentary participants in our study, small amounts of MVPA were also associated with lower mortality risk among those with low sedentary time.

Higher amounts of light physical activity were associated with lower mortality risk. This is consistent with previous studies.[11 27 36] However, light physical activity was not associated with mortality in those with low sedentary time. For total physical activity, the lowest mortality risk was observed among those with low sedentary time. Consequently, although high total

physical activity levels are possible to achieve in combination with high sedentary time, accumulating such large volumes of total physical activity and thus maximise risk reduction appears more easily achievable in combination with low sedentary time (ie, more light physical activity).

Nevertheless, combined with the result that light physical activity was only associated with lower mortality risk in the highly sedentary, this may indicate that maximal risk reduction for total physical activity in the least sedentary also included a fair amount of MVPA. This interpretation aligns with two recent studies, where the lowest mortality risks were observed in those with the greatest proportion of physical activity energy expenditure deriving from MVPA.[38 45] This means that for the highly sedentary, engagement in either light physical activity or MVPA are effective options for reducing mortality risk. However, for the least sedentary, a higher intensity (ie, MVPA) may be needed to obtain additional benefits. Moreover, we observed no excess risk at higher ends of total physical activity, which is consistent with previous studies.[11 38 46] Thus, there appears to be no harmful mortality risks for those engaging in high amounts of physical activity.

In joint analyses of MVPA and sedentary time, higher MVPA was associated with lower mortality risk at any given amount of sedentary time. Interestingly, this association was U-shaped with the lowest mortality risk observed at 10 hours of sedentary time. This is partly inconsistent with our analyses stratified by sedentary time (figure 1A), suggesting a J-shaped pattern. We speculate this may be explained by a cohort effect, as a U-shaped pattern of lower mortality risk with higher sedentary time was also observed in the analysis restricted to the Norwegian and Swedish cohorts. Both wear time and sedentary time were higher in these cohorts compared with the NHANES. While we excluded all data between 00:00 and 06:00 for harmonisation purposes, it is plausible that some sleep may have been misclassified as sedentary time.

Previous meta-analyses examining joint associations with device-measured physical activity and sedentary time have reported high mortality risks with high sedentary time.[14 15] One study reported that ~10–11 daily sedentary hours in combination with low MVPA (~2 min) were associated with a 140% higher mortality risk compared with the referent combining ~8 hours of sedentary time and 30–40 min of MVPA.[14] Others reported that ~8 hours of sedentary time in combination with ~2 min of MVPA was associated with a 60% lower mortality risk compared with ~12 hours of sedentary time.[15] We observed no higher mortality risk with higher sedentary time in our joint analysis. This may be attributed to our individual participant data analysis, which overcomes limitations of aggregated study-level data[19 20] used by others.[14 15] However, we cannot exclude the possibility that this observation is attributed to our participants being mostly older adults.

Strengths
Our individual participant data analysis allowed us to examine exposure-interaction associations with higher certainty,[19 20] including preserving continuous physical activity data, which likely minimised loss of information and statistical power.[21] Moreover, although our sensitivity analyses excluding the first 5 years of follow-up suggested attenuated magnitudes of associations, the dose–response patterns were similar.

Limitations
We lacked repeated measures of exposures and covariates during follow-up, which makes our analyses susceptive to changes in physical activity and confounders. A recent study reported lower mortality risk of long-term exposure of physical activity compared with a single baseline measure.[47] However, other studies have reported that high baseline physical activity yields similar lower mortality risk as increasing physical activity from low to high levels.[48–50] Moreover, a 7 day accelerometry recording appears reasonably stable over time.[51 52]

Statistical adjustments were limited to covariates that could be harmonised, leaving potential residual confounding from variables such as mobility limitations, diet, and general health status. Putative sources such as education, smoking and disease, which are associated with diet quality,[53] may to some degree act as proxies for non-included confounding sources. Follow-up time was short in some cohorts, which may influence our results as excluding follow-up years is likely insufficient to minimise the influence of reverse causation bias, particularly for sedentary time.[54] Larger studies of device-measured physical activity with longer follow-up are warranted to validate our findings.

Accelerometry-measured physical activity may not correctly classify all activity types and their corresponding intensity (eg, cycling, resistance-type exercises, garden work). Thus, we cannot exclude the possibility of some misclassification of the different intensities, such as sedentary time and light intensity physical activity, but also between light physical activity and MVPA. Our MVPA threshold was calibrated as an average from four validity protocols against indirect calorimetry during walking and running,[32–35] indicating the lower threshold of moderate-intensity physical activity for these activity types.[29] However, other activity types (eg, cycling, resistance-type exercises, garden work) that correspond to MVPA may be misclassified as light physical activity.

Similarly, our chosen sedentary time threshold may also introduce misclassification. For example, in one study, a threshold of <100 counts per min was found to be slightly more accurate (80% sensitivity; 67% specificity) than <150 counts per min (70% sensitivity; 67% specificity) in classifying sitting from standing, using thigh-worn monitors as the reference.[55] As there is no consensus on sedentary time thresholds, we used a commonly used threshold previously shown to provide sedentary time estimates associated with higher mortality risk.[11] Furthermore, we used an absolute intensity classification, which does not account for individual variation in age, cardiorespiratory fitness, body weight, or pre-existing conditions, which may all influence the relationship between absolute and relative physical activity.

This study includes mostly older adults, and whether the observed dose–response associations are generalisable to younger adults is unknown. Finally, due to the individual participant data approach, we were unable to use the sample weights provided by the NHANES to yield nationally representative estimates.[56] However, sample-weighted NHANES analyses were used in the sensitivity analysis by the NHANES cohort, and were consistent with our main analyses.

CONCLUSION
Sedentary time was associated with higher mortality risk only in individuals accumulating less than 22 min of MVPA per day. MVPA levels were associated with lower mortality risk irrespective of the amount of sedentary time. Efforts to promote physical activity may have substantial health benefits for individuals, and small amounts of MVPA may be an effective strategy to ameliorate mortality risk associated with high sedentary time.

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