

Exercise: How to Get Started

Why should I exercise? Increasing your activity level can help you live a longer life and improve your health. Exercise helps prevent heart disease and many other health problems. Exercise builds strength, gives you more energy, and helps reduce stress. It is also a good way to curb your appetite and burn calories.

Who should exercise? Increased physical activity can benefit almost everyone. Most people can begin gradual, moderate exercise on their own. If you think there is a reason you may not be able to exercise safely, talk with your doctor before beginning a new exercise program. Your doctor needs to know if you have heart trouble, high blood pressure, or arthritis, or if you feel dizzy often or have chest pains.

What kind of exercise should I do? Exercises that increase your heart rate and use large muscles (such as the muscles in your legs and arms) are best. Choose an activity that you enjoy and that you can start slowly and increase gradually as you become used to it. Walking is very popular and does not require special equipment. Other good exercises include swimming, biking, jogging, and dancing. Taking the stairs instead of the elevator and walking instead of driving are other good ways to start being more active.

How long should I exercise? Start off exercising three or more times a week for 20 minutes or more, and work up to 30 to 60 minutes, four to six times a week. This can include several short bouts of activity in a day. Exercising during a lunch break or on your way to do errands may help you add physical activity to a busy schedule. Exercising with a friend or a family member can help make it fun, and having a partner to encourage you can help you stick to your exercise program.

How hard do I have to exercise? Even small amounts of exercise are better than none at all. Start with an activity you can do comfortably. As you become more used to exercising, try to keep your heart rate between 60 and 85 percent of your maximum heart rate. Use the formulas below to figure out your target heart rate.

Target Heart Rate: $220 - (\text{your age in years}) = \text{Maximum Heart rate}$, to get to 60%, multiply your maximum heart rate by 0.6, to get your 85% rate, multiply that number by 0.85.

When you first start your exercise program, you may want to use the lower number to find your target heart rate. Then, as you get in better shape, you may want to use the higher number. Check your pulse by gently resting two fingers on the side of your neck and counting the beats for one minute. Use a watch with a second hand to time the minute.

How do I keep from getting hurt? Don't try to do too much too soon. Start with an activity that is fairly easy for you, such as walking. Do it for a few minutes a day or several times a day. Then slowly increase the time and intensity. For example, increase your speed over several weeks. Pay attention to your body. Stop exercising if you have pain or feel very out of breath, dizzy, or nauseated. If you feel tired or sore after exercising, take a day off to rest. Try not to give up entirely, even if you don't feel great

right away. Talk with your doctor if you have questions or think you have injured yourself seriously.

What about strength training? Most kinds of exercise will help your heart and your other muscles. Strength training is exercise that develops the strength and endurance of large muscle groups. Weight lifting is an example of this type of exercise. Exercise machines also can be used for strength training. Your doctor or a trainer at a health club can give you more information about exercising safely with weights or machines. Often this is done with “rest breaks” between “sets” of exercise, doing this takes some of the aerobic benefit away. It can also lead to muscle growth that can decrease the range of motion of certain joints.

How much exercise do I need? Talk to your doctor about how much exercise is right for you. A good goal for many people is to work up to exercising four to six times a week for 30 to 60 minutes at a time. Remember, though, that any amount of exercise is better than none.

How do I get started? Start by talking with your doctor. This is especially important if you haven't been active, if you have any health problems, or if you are pregnant or elderly.

Start out slowly. Begin with 10 minutes of light exercise or a brisk walk every day, and gradually increase how hard you exercise and for how long.

Sneak exercise into your day. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Go for a walk during your coffee or lunch break. Walk all or part of the way to work. Do housework at a fast pace. Rake leaves or do other yard work.

Making Exercise a Habit

- Stick to exercising at a regular time of day.
- Sign a contract committing yourself to exercise.
- Put "exercise appointments" on your calendar.
- Keep a daily log or diary of your activities.
- Check your progress. Can you walk a certain distance faster now than when you began? Is your heart rate slower?
- Ask your doctor to write a prescription for your exercise program, such as what type of exercise to do, how often to exercise, and for how long.

How do I stick with it?

Here are some tips that will help you start and stick with an exercise program:

- Choose an activity you like to do.
- Get a partner. Exercising with someone else can make it more fun.

- Vary your routine. You may be less likely to get bored or injured if you change your routine. Walk one day. Bicycle the next. Consider activities like dancing and racquet sports, and even chores like chopping wood.
- Choose a comfortable time of day. Don't work out too soon after eating or when it's too hot or cold outside. Wait until later in the day if your joints are too stiff in the morning.
- Don't get discouraged. It can take weeks or months before you notice some of the changes from exercise.
- Forget "no pain, no gain." It's normal to be a little sore after you first start exercising, but stop if you feel pain.
- Make exercise fun. Read, listen to music, or watch TV while riding a stationary bicycle, for example. Find fun things to do, like taking a walk through the zoo. Go dancing. Learn how to play tennis.