

# Hearts n♥ Parks

A Joint Program of the  
National Recreation and  
Park Association and  
the National Heart, Lung,  
and Blood Institute

## Get Moving for a Healthy Heart

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S. Fortunately, though, you can take steps to reduce your risk of heart disease. For example, getting regular physical activity can help protect you and your family against high blood pressure and overweight and obesity—factors that, along with high blood cholesterol and smoking, increase the risk of heart disease.

Staying active also helps keep off extra pounds, control blood pressure, boost the level of “good” HDL-cholesterol, and prevent diabetes and heart attacks. It also strengthens the lungs, tones the muscles, keeps the joints in good condition, improves balance, helps prevent and treat depression, and helps many people cope better with stress and anxiety.

If you already have heart disease, regular, moderate physical activity lowers your risk of death from heart-related causes. (However, if you have heart disease, check with your doctor first to find out what kinds of activities are best for you.)

The earlier you start, the better. The best time to start learning heart healthy habits is in childhood because heart disease risk factors start developing then too. Still, it’s never too late to begin living heart healthy. This is true even for people in their ‘80’s and ‘90’s too.

Here’s some advice about physical activity from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA):

- To reap benefits from physical activity, you don’t need to train for a marathon. You need to engage in only about 30 minutes of moderate-level activity on most—and preferably all—days of the week. A moderate-level activity is one that’s about as demanding as brisk walking.
- Other examples of moderate physical activity that can improve heart health are bicycling, conditioning or general calisthenics, racquet sports (such as table tennis), jogging, swimming, dancing, housework, gardening, or lawn mowing.



NATIONAL HEART, LUNG,  
AND BLOOD INSTITUTE

Department of Health and Human Services • Public Health Service • National Institutes of Health  
Bethesda, MD 20892

- You can engage in any of these activities for 30 minutes at one time, or you can do them in shorter periods of at least 10 minutes each, as long as you total approximately 30 minutes each day.
- If you are already engaging in this level of physical activity, you will receive extra health and fitness benefits by doing these activities for a longer period each day or becoming involved in more vigorous activity.

*Special Tips for Kids, Adults, and Seniors:*

*Young people* should be physically active—both in and out of school. Instead of television, video games and the computer, kids need to be engaged in “active play,” such as tag, jump rope, hide and seek, or bicycling, or team activities like soccer, basketball, and softball.

Another way to increase children’s activity levels is to get them involved in everyday activities, like household chores, walking the dog, or helping with the groceries.

Take the time to be physically active as a family. This not only provides health benefits for the entire family but can be an important time to get to know each other better. Young kids particularly enjoy being involved in family fun, such as shooting hoops with dad or playing tennis with mom.

*Adults* who have not been active for a while should start slowly, gradually building up to the recommended 30 minutes per day of moderate-level activity. For example, if you want to begin walking regularly, you might begin with a 10-15-minute walk three times a week. As you become more fit, you can increase the sessions to every day and gradually lengthen each walking session or increase your pace.

Some adults should get medical advice before starting a program of physical activity. Consult your doctor first if you:

- Have heart trouble or have had a heart attack;
- Are taking medicine for high blood pressure or a heart condition;
- Are over 50 years old and not used to moderately energetic activity;
- Have someone in your family who developed heart disease at an early age.

*Seniors* also need regular physical activity. Regular physical activity is good for your heart, mood, muscles, and arteries and improves your bones and ability to sleep well. It builds strength, promotes coordination and balance, and helps slow bone loss and prevent fractures from osteoporosis.

Many older people think they are too old or too frail to exercise. Nothing could be further from the truth. Physical activity of any kind—from heavy-duty exercise, such as jogging or bicycling, to easier efforts like walking—is good for you.

Older people who become more active—including those with medical problems—may feel better and have more energy. Being active is also an easy way to share some time with friends or family, as well as to meet new friends.

### **Keys to Success:**

- Go slow. If you have not been physically active until now, gradually build up to the recommended 30 minutes per day of moderate-level activity.
- Begin each workout slowly. Allow a 5-minute period of stretching and slow movement to “warm up” and 5 minutes at the end to “cool down” at a slower pace.
- Listen to your body. A certain amount of stiffness is normal at first. But if you hurt a joint or pull a muscle or tendon, stop the activity for several days to avoid more serious injury.
- Pay attention to warning signals. Some types of physical activity may worsen heart problems. Warning signals include sudden dizziness, cold sweat, paleness, fainting, or pain or pressure in your upper body or chest while—or just after—physical activity. If you notice any of these signs, stop and call your doctor immediately.
- Check the weather. Dress appropriately for hot, humid days and for cold days, and drink lots of water before, during, and after activity.
- Keep at it. Unless you have to stop your activity for a health reason, stay with it. Set small, short-term goals for yourself. If you find yourself becoming bored, try doing the activity with a friend or family member. Or switch to another activity.

**Learn more by visiting NHLBI online at  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)**