

Chapter 10. Making Physical Activity Part of a Healthier You

Most of us know we need to be physically active to be healthy. It's not new information, but it leaves us with many questions and many opinions. There's plenty of information about physical activity, but sorting through it and figuring out what to do can be challenging. Instead of answering questions, all that information only seems to generate more: "What exactly does being physically active mean? Is this physical activity or 'exercise?'" How much do we need versus what can we do to get by? Do we need to do it all at once? Is there an easy way to fit it into our day, because life is pretty hectic already?" So many questions...plus, almost every day, a new exercise product is introduced promising a quick fix—to whip us into shape requiring only the slightest amount of effort on our part. If only that were true, we tell ourselves....

START OFF SMALL

by Lynn Swann*

I have a friend who wanted and needed to lose weight. He went to a trainer and said he wanted to start a workout program. My friend is about 5'4". His weight was north of 300 pounds. The trainer told him to get dressed and walk for as long and as far as he could. After about 20 minutes of walking, he came back and asked the trainer what was next. The trainer said, "That's it. Come back tomorrow." My friend came back the next day and repeated the same 20-minute walk. He continued to walk each day until he could run.... To date, my friend has now run 19 marathons around the world and weighs 165 pounds.

The point: if you just take that first step and consistently stick with it, you can reach high goals. Starting off slowly with small achievable goals and sound advice will ensure safety in your training routine and deter you from giving up. This way you will not be overwhelmed by a large, daunting long-term goal, and you'll gain all the benefits of regular physical activity.

*NFL Hall of Fame Member and Former Chair of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

Here's what we can agree on—we'll give it to you straight: The basic, scientifically grounded information on physical activity. Then, we'll begin to figure out how to balance this with your day and your lifestyle.

Earlier, in “My Personal Profile,” you determined your starting activity level: Sedentary, Moderately Active, or Active. This was part of determining how physically active you currently are and estimating your daily calorie needs, which is key to setting your goals. Whether you are trying to gain, lose, or maintain your weight, physical activity goes hand in hand with good nutrition and overall health.

The basics

Science tells us that when it comes down to our overall health, adults, regardless of age, need to do two key types of physical activities:

- **Cardio or Aerobic⁹:** At a minimum, do moderately intense cardio activity for at least 30 minutes per day, most days of the week.

AND

- **Strength Training:** At a minimum, 2 days per week.

We are going to introduce a couple of terms that you may be less familiar with in this context—moderately intense and vigorously intense. By understanding how much effort we need to exert, we can begin to choose what kind of activity fits our available time, life, and needs. Here are some tips and examples to help identify whether physical activity is moderately or vigorously intense.

Cardio—What's Your Intensity?

Moderate: While performing the physical activity, if your heart is beating noticeably faster—it's probably moderately intense. We need to do this level of activity for at least 30 minutes, most days of the week.

Examples include:

- walking briskly (a 15-minute mile)
- light yard work (raking/bagging leaves or using a lawn mower)
- light snow shoveling
- actively playing with children
- biking at a casual pace.

⁹ Cardio or aerobic exercise is any type of exercise that increases the work of the heart and lungs.

Vigorous: If you are breathing hard and fast and your heart rate is increased substantially during physical activity, it's probably vigorously intense.

Examples include:

- jogging/running
- swimming laps
- rollerblading/inline skating at a brisk pace
- cross-country skiing
- most competitive sports (football, basketball, or soccer)
- jumping rope.

You don't have to do 30 minutes all at once...

To meet the goal of 30 minutes a day of moderately intense physical activity, you don't have to do all 30 minutes at once. Scientific evidence shows you get the same health benefits from breaking 30 minutes up into three 10-minute or two 15-minute intervals throughout the day, if you prefer. Daily activities like climbing several flights of stairs or parking farther away from store entrances are a good start. But if you don't do that activity for at least 10 minutes at a time, it doesn't help you meet the recommendation for 30 minutes of moderately intense physical activity. In addition, for most people, greater health benefits can be obtained by engaging in physical activity of more vigorous intensity or of longer duration.

What is strength training and why do it?

Moving on to the second type of physical activity—strength training. This consists of resistance exercises, which means your muscles work or hold against an applied force or weight. These exercises increase the strength of our muscles, help maintain the integrity of our bones, and may improve our balance, coordination, and mobility. Strength training can also change the appearance of our bodies with better muscle definition. Usually, resistance exercises are done using weights or workout bands, but there are other ways to achieve the same effect. If you like going to the gym, include resistance exercises in your routine there; or look at the examples on the next page and do them at home. Strength training or resistance exercises can be done anywhere. An example of a goal to work toward could be to do 8 to 12 repetitions of 6 to 8 strength-training exercises twice a week.

Examples include:

- push-ups
- pull-ups
- biceps curls
- sit-ups
- carrying full laundry baskets
- rowing a boat
- strength training in aerobics class.

Both strength training and cardio activity are important. In particular, strength training helps develop and maintain healthy bones, and develop and tone muscles.

What's in it for me?

Part of it comes down to: Feeling better! Looking better! Not so bad, right? In the big picture, it also comes down to good physical health. If that's not enough, there's also that sense of well-being you get from regular physical activity—a constructive way to deal with the demands of the day, release stress, and just feel better about yourself. Many people say that exercising regularly helps them have more energy, sleep better, and simply, enjoy taking time to do something good for themselves.

With most everything, extra work really does pay off! Physical activity is no exception, and the more active you are, the more you benefit. For example, you can further reduce your risk for many chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, colon and breast cancers, and osteoporosis, by doing more than the minimum 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most days of the week. Incorporating up to 60 minutes of cardio activity may also help you to prevent unhealthy weight gain or to manage your weight, if that is your goal.

"I feel my day isn't complete without some physical activity. I know I miss it on the days I don't do it."

— Eric, age 42

Some of us suffer from the yo-yo factor—weight on, weight off, weight on, weight off. Sure, we can lose the weight, but how do we keep it off for good? That may take at least 60 to 90 minutes of daily moderate-intensity physical activity. Sounds like a lot—no kidding! But it's the truth based on the data of people who have successfully lost weight (at least 30 pounds) and kept it off for at least a year. Keep your perspective and start small—do your physical activity in 10-minute moderately intense increments and build up. Eventually, you will become your own success story.

Different intensities and types of exercise offer different benefits. Cardio or aerobic activities exercise your heart and increase your ability to be physically active for a longer period of time. This type of endurance makes it easier to carry out harder tasks for longer periods of time—whether it's keeping up with your kids or grandchildren, or playing basketball with your co-workers. Strength training or resistance exercises also contribute to muscular endurance. Strength training is especially beneficial as we get older. As we age, we tend to lose bone and muscle mass, making it difficult to carry out everyday activities: getting in and out of a chair, carrying groceries or laundry, or just walking. Together, cardio and strength training work your whole body. Vigorous physical activity (for example, jogging or other aerobic exercises) provides greater health benefits for physical fitness than does moderate physical activity and burns more calories per unit of time. Aside from all the health benefits, what a bonus that it also seems to make us feel better about ourselves.

Now to the biggest challenge: How do we fit this into our life? Our busy, already-pressed-for-time, on-a-budget life? A lot of people have shared their thoughts with us. Here's some of their feedback on what works.

Buddy System: Some days it's hard to talk yourself into an activity. Working with others who are going through the same thing can be motivating, especially when you promised that you would meet for a walk in the park, or a tennis match, or signed up to take a yoga class together. You don't want to let your buddy down. In the process, you end up not letting yourself down either. Buddies can be co-workers, spouses, neighbors, or even faraway friends that you stay in touch with via e-mail and provide encouragement. Heck, your walking buddy can even be your pet!

The Great Outdoors: Opportunities for physical activity may be closer than you think. Take advantage of public parks and pools. There are millions of acres to explore—walk, hike, swim, kayak, canoe, and bike. Also consider being a volunteer. Whether it's leading a hike or cleaning a trail or playground, you are making a difference in your life and others'.

Enjoy What You Do: If aerobicizing in a room full of people isn't your thing, why do it? There are hundreds of activities to choose from. Find something you like and chances are you will stick with it. Maybe you were a swimmer when you were younger, but haven't thought of it since high school. Many local park and recreation facilities, or area schools, have open or lap swims. Some people enjoy walking around a nearby school track, or if you prefer indoors, walk at your local mall. What about

hiking at a local, state, or national park; playing in a soccer, volleyball, or softball league; or taking a yoga, Pilates, or tai-chi class a couple days a week? Don't limit yourself. Don't get discouraged. Pick a few activities to try out, rotate them, and slowly you will figure out what works best for you. Trying something new can be fun and give you more confidence to pursue other activities.

At this point, turn to part III, "My Physical Activity Tracker," on page 113. You can tear it out and make copies for your circle of family and friends. Take a look at the physical activity log—and use it to start tracking your progress. If you prefer, you can track it online at www.presidentschallenge.org.

Hmm...before we wrap up this chapter, we think there might be some of you that still need more nudging—the self-professed couch potatoes. The "I don't exercise, don't want to exercise, hate the thought of exercise, 'run' away from exercise" types. Is that you? We are not giving up on you. We are good to go...armed with over 100 ways for those of you who are allergic to exercise to take that first step. Check out www.smallstep.gov, for small steps to increase your physical activity...gradually build up some endurance to keep going...and begin that lifestyle makeover.

Best of all, no matter what your age, physical ability or limitations, or physical activity level, it's never too late to start! Some form of physical activity is right for everyone.

Summing it up

Let's summarize what we've learned about making physical activity part of a Healthier You:

- Be physically active for at least 30 minutes per day, most days of the week.
- All adults, regardless of age, need both cardio or aerobic, and strength training, for overall health.
- Cardio or Aerobic Activities: At a minimum, do at least 30 minutes of cardio or aerobic moderately intense activities (which can be performed in 10-minute intervals), most days of the week.
- Strength Training: Recommended at least 2 days per week. A goal, for example, might be 8 to 12 repetitions of 6 to 8 strength-training exercises.
- Increasing the intensity or the amount of time that you are physically active can have greater health benefits and may be needed to control body weight. About 60 minutes a day may be needed to prevent weight gain.
- At least 60 to 90 minutes of physical activity most days may be needed to prevent regaining weight for the formerly overweight or obese.