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TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Physical Activity

Q: How can physical activity improve my health?

A: The new 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans state that an active lifestyle can lower your risk of early death from a variety of causes. There is strong evidence that regular physical activity can also lower your risk of:

- Heart disease
- Stroke
- High blood pressure
- Unhealthy cholesterol levels
- Type 2 diabetes
- Metabolic syndrome
- Colon cancer
- Breast cancer
- Falls
- Depression

Regular activity can help prevent unhealthy weight gain and also help with weight loss, when combined with lower calorie intake. If you are overweight or obese, losing weight can lower your risk for many diseases. Being overweight or obese increases your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, type 2 diabetes, breathing problems, osteoarthritis, gallbladder disease, sleep apnea (breathing problems while sleeping), and some cancers.

Regular physical activity can also improve your cardiorespiratory (heart, lungs, and blood vessels) and muscular fitness. For older adults, activity can improve mental function.

Physical activity may also help:

- Improve functional health for older adults
- Reduce waistline size
- Lower risk of hip fracture
- Lower risk of lung cancer
- Lower risk of endometrial cancer
- Maintain weight after weight loss
- Increase bone density
- Improve sleep quality

Body Mass Index

You can get an idea of whether you are obese, overweight, or of normal weight by figuring out your body mass index (BMI). BMI is a number calculated from your weight and height. Women with a BMI of 25 to 29.9 are considered overweight. Women with a BMI of 30 or more are considered obese. All adults (aged 18 years or older) with a BMI of 25 or higher are considered at risk for serious health problems. These health risks increase as your BMI rises. Your doctor or nurse can help you figure out your BMI, or you can use online BMI calculator of Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Q: How much physical activity should I do?

A: Health benefits are gained by doing the following each week:



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- 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity

or

- 1 hour and 15 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity

or

- A combination of moderate and vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity

and

- Muscle-strengthening activities on 2 or more days

This physical activity should be in addition to your routine activities of daily living, such as cleaning or spending a few minutes walking from the parking lot to your office.

Moderate Activity

During moderate-intensity activities you should notice an increase in your heart rate, but you should still be able to talk comfortably. An example of a moderate-intensity activity is walking on a level surface at a brisk pace (about 3 to 4 miles per hour). Other examples include ballroom dancing, leisurely bicycling, moderate housework, and waiting tables.

Vigorous Activity

If your heart rate increases a lot and you are breathing so hard that it is difficult to carry on a conversation, you are probably doing vigorous-intensity activity. Examples of vigorous-intensity activities include jogging, bicycling fast or uphill, singles tennis, and pushing a hand mower.

Q: How much physical activity do I need to do to lose weight?

A: If you want to lose a substantial (more than 5 percent of body weight) amount of weight, you need a high amount of physical activity unless you also lower calorie intake. This is also the case if you are trying to keep the weight off. Many people need to do more than 300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity a week to meet weight-control goals.

Q: Does the type of physical activity I choose matter?

A: Yes! Engaging in different types of physical activity is important to overall physical fitness. Your fitness routine should include aerobic and strength-training activities, and may also include stretching activities.

Aerobic activities

These activities move large muscles in your arms, legs, and hips over and over again. Examples include walking, jogging, bicycling, swimming, and tennis.

Strength-training activities

These activities increase the strength and endurance of your muscles. Examples of strength-training activities include working out with weight machines, free weights, and resistance bands. (A resistance band looks like a giant rubber band. You can buy one at a sporting goods store.) Push-ups and sit-ups are examples of strength-training activities you can do without any equipment. You also can use soup cans to work out your arms.

Aim to do strength-training activities at least twice a week. In each strength-training session, you should do 8 to 10 different activities using the different muscle groups throughout your body,



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such as the muscles in your abdomen, chest, arms, and legs. Repeat each activity 8 to 12 times, using a weight or resistance that will make you feel tired. When you do strength-training activities, slowly increase the amount of weight or resistance that you use. Also, allow one day in between sessions to avoid excess strain on your muscles and joints.

Stretching

Stretching improves flexibility, allowing you to move more easily. This will make it easier for you to reach down to tie your shoes or look over your shoulder when you back the car out of your driveway. You should do stretching activities after your muscles are warmed up — for example, after strength training. Stretching your muscles before they are warmed up may cause injury.

Q: How can I prevent injuries when I work out?

A: Being physically active is safe if you are careful. Take these steps to prevent injury:

- If you're not active at all or have a health problem, start your program with short sessions (5 to 10 minutes) of physical activity and build up to your goal. (Be sure to ask a doctor before you start if you have a health problem.)
- Use safety equipment such as a helmet for bike riding or supportive shoes for walking or jogging.
- Start every workout with a warm-up. If you plan to walk at a brisk pace, start by walking at an easy pace for 5 to 10 minutes. When you're done working out, do the same thing until your heart rate returns to

normal.

- Drink plenty of fluids when you are physically active, even if you are not thirsty.
- Use sunscreen when you are outside.
- Always bend forward from the hips, not the waist. If you keep your back straight, you're probably bending the right way. If your back "humps," that's probably wrong.
- Stop your activity if you feel very out of breath, dizzy, nauseous, or have pain. If you feel tightness or pain in your chest, or you feel faint or have trouble breathing, stop the activity right away and talk to your doctor.

Exercise should not hurt or make you feel really tired. You might feel some soreness, a little discomfort, or a bit weary. But you should not feel pain. In fact, in many ways, being active will probably make you feel better.

Q: I am a larger woman. Can I be physically active?

A: Yes! You may face special challenges, but you can work hard to overcome them. You may not be able to bend or move in the same way that other people can. It may be hard to find clothes and equipment. You also may feel self-conscious being active around other people. But you can get past these hurdles. Keep trying different ways to make physical activity a part of your life. It is important to your health!

Activities such as swimming or exercising while seated put less stress on your joints because your legs are not supporting the weight of your body. If



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your feet or joints hurt when you stand, nonweight-bearing activities may be best for you. Ask your doctor for help in coming up with a physical activity plan that's right for you.

Remember that physical activity does not have to be hard or boring to be good for you. Anything that gets you moving around — even for only a few minutes a day — is a healthy start to getting more fit. Over time, you will be able to work out longer and vary the types of activity you can do.

If you commit to being physically active on a regular basis, your body will thank you because it can make a big difference to your health. Even if you do not lose weight, you will still lower your risk of getting many diseases by being physically active. And if you do lose weight, you'll get even more health benefits!

Q: Can I stay active if I have a disability?

A: A disability may make it harder to stay active, but it shouldn't stop you. In most cases, people with disabilities can improve their flexibility, mobility, and coordination by becoming physically active. Getting regular physical activity can also help you stay independent by preventing illnesses, such as heart disease, that can make caring for yourself more difficult.

Even though you have a disability, you should still aim to meet the physical activity goals listed in *How much physical activity should I do?* Work with a doctor to develop a physical activity plan that works for you.

Q: What are some tips to help me get moving?

A: Fit it into a busy schedule

- If you can't set aside one block of time, do short activities throughout the day, such as three 10-minute walks.
- Create opportunities for activity. Try parking your car farther away from where you are headed. If you ride the bus or train, get off one or two stops early and walk.
- Walk or bike to work or to the store.
- Use stairs instead of the elevator or escalator.
- Take breaks at work to stretch or take quick walks, or do something active with coworkers at lunch.
- Walk while you talk, if you're using a cell phone or cordless phone.
- Doing yard work or household chores counts as physical activity. Turn on some upbeat music to help you do chores faster and speed up your heart rate.

Make it fun

- Choose activities that you enjoy.
- Vary your activities, so you don't get bored. For instance, use different jogging, walking, or biking paths. Or bike one day, and jog the next.
- Reward yourself when you achieve your weekly goals. For instance, reward yourself by going to a movie.
- If you have children, make time to play with them outside. Set a good example!
- Plan active vacations that will keep you moving, such as taking tours and site-seeing on foot.



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Make it social

- Join a hiking or running club.
- Go dancing with your partner or friends.
- Turn activities into social occasions — for example, go to a movie after you and a friend work out.

Overcome challenges

- Don't let cold weather keep you on the couch. You can find activities to do in the winter, such as indoor fitness classes or exercising to a workout video.
- If you live in a neighborhood where it is unsafe to be active outdoors, contact your local recreational center or church to see if they have indoor activity programs that you can join. You can also find ways to be active at home. For instance, you can do push-ups or lift hand weights. If you don't have hand weights, you can use canned foods or bottles filled with water or sand.

Don't expect to notice body changes right away. It can take weeks or months before you notice some of the changes from being physically active, such as weight loss. And keep in mind, many benefits of physical activity are happening inside you and you cannot see them.

Q: Do I need to talk to my doctor before I start?

A: You should talk to your doctor before you begin any physical activity program if you:

- Have heart disease, had a stroke, or are at high risk for these diseases
- Have diabetes or are at high risk for diabetes
- Are obese (BMI of 30 or greater)
- Have an injury or disability
- Are pregnant
- Have a bleeding or detached retina, eye surgery, or laser treatment on your eye
- Have had recent hip surgery ■



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For more information

For more information on physical activity, please call womenshealth.gov at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans (2008), HHS, ODPHP

Phone: 800-336-4797

Internet Address: <http://www.health.gov/paguidelines>

Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity, NCCDPHP, CDC

Phone: (770) 488-6042

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/>

Food and Nutrition Information Center, NAL, USDA

Phone: (301) 504-5414

Internet Address: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/>

HealthierUS.gov

Phone: (301) 565-4167

Internet Address: <http://www.healthierus.gov/exercise.html>

Weight Control Information Network, NIDDK, NIH, HHS

Phone: (877) 946-4627

Internet Address: <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/win.htm>

The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

Phone: (202) 690-9000

Internet Address: <http://www.fitness.gov/>

American Council on Exercise

Phone: (888) 825-3636

Internet Address: <http://www.acefitness.org/>

America On the Move

Phone: (800) 807-0077

Internet Address: <http://aom.americaon-themove.org/>

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