

2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans Frequently Asked Questions



General Questions

What is the purpose of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans?

The *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is designed to provide information and guidance on the types and amounts of physical activity that provide substantial health benefits for Americans aged 6 years and older. The main idea behind the Guidelines is that regular physical activity over months and years can produce long-term health benefits.

What is new about the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans?

HHS is publishing comprehensive Physical Activity Guidelines for the first time with the *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*. The Physical Activity Guidelines are new because they represent:

- The first major review of the science on benefits of physical activity in more than a decade.
- A range of physical activity: the more you do, the more benefits you gain.

- A total amount of activity per week that allows people to design their own way of meeting the guidelines.
- Physical activity recommendations for groups such as children and adolescents, adults, older adults, persons with disabilities, pregnant and postpartum women, and persons with some chronic conditions.

What are the major conclusions described in the Physical Activity Guidelines?

The *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* describe the major research findings about the health benefits of physical activity:

- Regular physical activity reduces the risk of many adverse health outcomes.
- Some physical activity is better than none.
- For most health outcomes, additional benefits occur as the amount of physical activity increases through higher intensity, greater frequency, and/or longer duration.
- Most health benefits occur with at least 2 hours and 30 minutes (150 minutes) a week of moderate-intensity physical activity, such as brisk walking. Additional benefits occur with more physical activity.
- Episodes of activity that are at least 10 minutes long count toward meeting the Guidelines.
- Both aerobic (endurance) and muscle-strengthening (resistance) physical activity are beneficial.



- Health benefits of physical activity occur for children and adolescents, young and middle-aged adults, older adults, and those in every studied racial and ethnic group.
- Health benefits of physical activity are attainable for people with disabilities.
- The benefits of physical activity outweigh the risks of injury and heart attack.

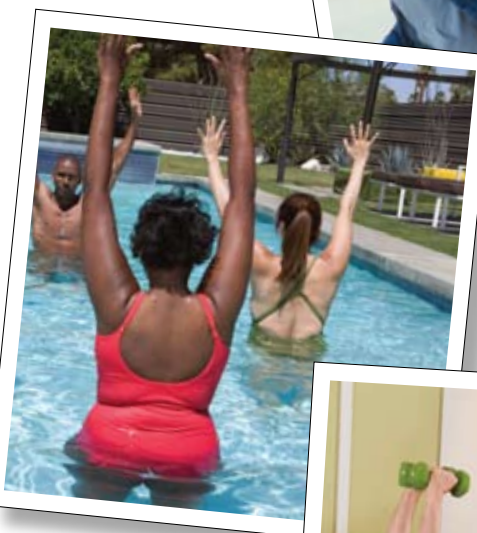
Do the new Physical Activity Guidelines apply to all Americans?

Yes, the Physical Activity Guidelines are for Americans aged 6 years and older. The Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee did not review evidence for children younger than age 6, although physical activity for infants and young children is necessary for healthy growth and development. Children younger than age 6 should do physical activity appropriate for their age and stage of development.

What are the Guidelines for adults?

Adults should do a minimum of 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity a week by doing activities like brisk walking, ballroom dancing, or general gardening. Adults can choose 1 hour and 15 minutes (75 minutes) a week of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity by doing exercise like jogging, aerobic dancing, and jumping rope. Adults also may choose combinations of moderate- and vigorous-intensity aerobic activity.

Aerobic activity should be performed in episodes of at least 10 minutes, and preferably spread throughout the week. For additional and more extensive health benefits, adults should increase their aerobic physical activity to 5 hours (300 minutes) a week of moderate-intensity or 2 hours and 30 minutes a week of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity or an equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity activity. Additional health benefits are gained by engaging in physical activity beyond this amount. Adults should also do muscle-strengthening activities on 2 or more days a week to achieve the unique benefits of strengthening activities.



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What are the Guidelines for children and adolescents?

Children and adolescents aged 6–17 years should accumulate 1 hour or more of physical activity daily. The 1 hour of activity should be mostly aerobic but should also include muscle-strengthening and bone-strengthening activities. Youth should include vigorous-intensity activity in this 1 hour on at least 3 days a week. They should also do muscle-strengthening activities on at least 3 days and bone-strengthening activities on at least 3 days a week. It is important to encourage young people to participate in physical activities that are appropriate for their age, enjoyable, and offer variety. The Guidelines list a number of examples of each type of activity for children and adolescents.

Should everyone get the same amount of physical activity?

The amount of physical activity individuals should get each week differs based on a number of factors. The amount and types of activity needed varies based on age and special conditions. These conditions include pregnancy and the postpartum period for women, disabilities, and chronic medical or health conditions.

At a minimum, all adults and older adults should aim for 2 hours and 30 minutes each week. Youth should be active for 1 hour each day. The Guidelines generally explain the amounts and types of physical activity needed for health benefits. Individuals have many choices about appropriate types and amounts of activity. To make these choices, American adults need to set personal goals for physical activity. People can



meet the Guidelines and their own personal goals through different amounts and types of activity.

Inactive persons can begin to gain the health benefits as they increase their physical activity even before they reach 2 hours and 30 minutes each week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity.

Is physical activity recommended for persons with disabilities?

Children, adolescents, adults, and older adults with disabilities should meet the Guidelines when possible and should avoid inactivity because physical activity offers many health



benefits. When persons with disabilities are not able to meet the Guidelines, they should be as active as possible and avoid being inactive. Persons with disabilities should work with their health care provider to understand the types and amounts of physical activity appropriate for them.

Are the Guidelines for older adults different from other adults?

Many healthy and fit older adults can follow the guidelines for adults. Some adults who are unfit or who have activity-limiting chronic conditions may need to follow the guidelines for older adults. Most of the guidelines are the same for adults and older adults, but some additional guidelines are just for older adults. These are:

- When older adults cannot do 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity a week because of chronic conditions, they should be as physically active as their abilities and conditions allow.
- Older adults should do exercises that maintain or improve balance if they are at risk for falling.
- Older adults should use relative intensity to determine their level of effort for physical activity.
- Older adults with chronic conditions should understand whether and how their conditions affect their ability to do regular physical activity safely.

Why is the government encouraging people to be more physically active?

HHS is publishing Physical Activity Guidelines for the first time because being physically active is one of the most important steps that Americans of all ages can take to improve their health. The *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* provide science-based guidance to help Americans aged 6 years and older improve their health through appropriate physical activity.

These Guidelines are necessary because of the importance of physical activity to the health of Americans, whose current inactivity puts them at unnecessary risk. Unfortunately, the latest information shows that inactivity among American adults and youth remains relatively high and little progress has been made in increasing the level of physical activity in the population.



How do the new Physical Activity Guidelines differ from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans?

The *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* and the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* provide complementary and consistent advice for physical activity. The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* provide general guidance about physical activity and healthy eating for a wide range of health benefits, including weight control. The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* are updated every 5 years. For the Dietary Guidelines, see www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines. The Physical Activity Guidelines include a more comprehensive listing of health benefits, provide specific amounts and types of physical activity, and offer options and benefits to all populations and many subgroups.

How do the HHS Physical Activity Guidelines support “Healthy Youth for a Healthy Future,” an HHS Childhood Overweight and Obesity Prevention Initiative?

The HHS “Healthy Youth for a Healthy Future” (HYHF), Childhood Overweight and Obesity Prevention Initiative led by the Surgeon General, promotes the importance of healthy eating and physical activity at a young age to help prevent overweight and obesity in this country. HYHF focuses on recognizing and showcasing communities throughout America that are coming together to address childhood overweight and obesity prevention by encouraging kids to eat right and exercise. To change children’s eating and activity habits, this initiative concentrates on many of the people who influence our children, including parents, caregivers, schools, public health leaders and local community leaders. The Surgeon General has embarked on a national tour to recognize and highlight those communities with effective prevention programs and to motivate community members to join together in their efforts to encourage kids to eat healthier and increase physical activity to at least 60 minutes a day.

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The Guidelines and other HHS evidence-informed recommendations provide the scientific basis for the physical activity actions called for as part of the HYHF initiative to “Help Kids Stay Active” and “Promote Healthy Choices.” Through the Surgeon General’s Pledge, all who wish to join this movement to help children achieve and maintain a healthy weight commit to “helping children be physically active through everyday play and participation in sports.” Additional resources and specific implementation strategies are available at: www.surgeongeneral.gov/obesityprevention/.





In 1995, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) published physical activity recommendations for public health. The report stated that adults should accumulate at least 30 minutes a day of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days per week. In 1996, *Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General* supported this same recommendation.

The 2008 *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* affirm that it is acceptable to follow the CDC/ACSM recommendation and similar recommendations. However, according to the Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee report, the CDC/ACSM guideline was too specific. In other words, existing scientific evidence does not allow researchers to say, for example, whether the health benefits of 30 minutes on 5 days a week are any different from the health benefits of 50 minutes on 3 days a week. As a result, the new Guidelines allow a person to accumulate 2 hours and 30 minutes a week in various ways.

How are the Guidelines different from previous government physical activity recommendations?

The Federal Government has never before issued comprehensive physical activity guidelines for the Nation. HHS is publishing Physical Activity Guidelines for the first time with the 2008 *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*. The Guidelines represent the first major review of the science on benefits of physical activity in more than a decade. Unlike previous recommendations, the Guidelines specify a total amount of activity per week that allows people to design their own way of meeting the guidelines. People can choose from many activities and can accumulate activities in bouts of 10 minutes throughout the week. In addition, individuals can do moderate-intensity activity, vigorous-intensity activity, or a combination of the two. Muscle-strengthening activity is advised on 2 or more days a week.

How do the Healthy People 2010 objectives on physical activity and fitness differ from the new HHS Physical Activity Guidelines?

The Healthy People 2010 objectives were developed and released in January 2000 based on the research and science from such reports as the *Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health* and national surveys. Healthy People outlines public health goals (including goals for physical activity and fitness) for each decade, whereas the Physical Activity Guidelines identify specific amounts of physical activity individuals should do to accrue health benefits. Essentially, more people meeting the Guidelines may improve measures included in Healthy People.



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What can communities do?

Communities can take action to ensure that regular physical activity is an easy choice. Communities can provide many opportunities for physical activity, such as walking trails, bicycle lanes on roads, sidewalks, and sports fields. Community organizations have a role to play. Schools, places of worship, worksites, and community centers can provide opportunities and encouragement for physical activity.

To be effective, physical activity promotion efforts should use an “evidence-based” approach. The *Guide to Community Preventive Services (Community Guide)* published by the CDC has reviewed many community-level approaches to promote physical activity. Five strongly recommended strategies are described in the Guidelines.

Are you changing earlier recommendations of 30 minutes on most days of the week for adults and 60 minutes a day for youth and, if so, why?

The Guidelines specify a total amount of activity per week that allows people to design their own way of meeting the guidelines. For example, an individual can meet the minimum recommendation of 2 hours and 30 minutes (150 minutes) of moderate-intensity aerobic activity a week by doing 30 minutes a day on 5 days of the week as recommended by

the CDC and the ACSM in 1995 and by the *Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*, published in 1996. However, an individual can also accumulate aerobic activity in many other ways; for example, doing 50 minutes of moderate-intensity activity on 3 days, or a 30-minute brisk walk on 2 days and a 90-minute weekend hike. An individual also can do vigorous-intensity activity or a combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity activity. In addition, the Guidelines recommend muscle-strengthening activity on 2 or more days a week.

The minimum guideline for children remains 60 minutes daily. However, more detail has been provided. Most of the activity should be moderate- or vigorous-intensity aerobic activity. Children should include vigorous-intensity activity on at least 3 days a week. Children should do muscle-strengthening activity on at least 3 days a week. They also should do bone-strengthening activity on at least 3 days a week.





You can find more information about the new advice on physical activity in the full report. Go to www.health.gov/paguidelines.

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