

STAYING HEALTHY

Starting an Exercise Program

The toughest and most important step in an exercise program is getting started. People often try to tackle a strenuous program right away, thinking it will bring results faster. But if it has been a long time since you have exercised, slow and steady is the most effective and safest way to begin.

You need a workable plan to change your lifestyle from sedentary to physically active. If you have an existing health problem, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, a history of heart disease, or are a smoker, you should contact your doctor before beginning any vigorous physical activity.

Following some basic guidelines can help you establish an exercise program that protects you against disease and disability and insures a healthy, independent, and productive life.



Choosing activities that you enjoy and establishing a routine that fits your lifestyle makes it easier to stick to an exercise program.

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Prepare for Success

Your goal is to establish an exercise routine you enjoy. Make sure your first activity sessions are fun and not tiring. Give your body a chance to get used to it.

Take plenty of time to warm up and cool down with walking and gentle stretching exercises.

Selecting Exercise Activities

Some people prefer exercising at home. This is more economical and convenient than joining a fitness club or taking exercise classes. To be successful exercising at home, however, you must be self-motivated in order to stick with your program.

Exercising at a fitness club is a good choice for those who like the stimulation of being with others and having the range of exercise options – machines, fitness classes, personal trainers – that a club provides. It is, however, a greater expense than exercising at home.

Whether exercising at home or at a gym, choose activities that can be practiced comfortably year-round. Try to have both indoor and outdoor exercise options. That way the weather or boredom will not be easy excuses for skipping your workout.

Ensuring Proper Equipment

Shoes. Proper-fitting sports shoes can enhance athletic performance and prevent injuries. Wear athletic shoes that are comfortable, provide good support, and do not cause blisters or calluses. It is helpful to purchase your shoes from a store that has salespeople who are knowledgeable about athletic shoes and different foot types.

Home equipment. If your plan is to set up a workout area in your home, be sure to try out any equipment before you purchase it. This can be done in the store or at a local fitness center. Libraries and video rental services have a wide range of exercise videos that you can try before purchasing, as well.

New technology. There are a wide range of products that can enhance your fitness routine if you are motivated by technology. Fitness apps for smart devices have become very popular. For example, fitness apps can provide new running/walking routes, track your distance, or show you new exercises.

A simple heart rate monitor measures your heart rate during exercise and helps you track your progress as your cardiovascular fitness improves. A fitness tracker worn on the wrist can track even more data – such as your daily step count and calories burned – and also provide a training plan and serve as a daily training log.

Exercise video games are also an option for some people. The more strenuous video games can also improve your fitness, as long as you do them actively.

A Balanced Exercise Program

Exercise programs that get the best results are made up of three main elements: aerobic conditioning, flexibility exercises, and strength training.

Aerobic Conditioning

Aerobic exercise improves the health of your heart, lungs, and vascular system. It also helps you manage your weight because aerobic exercise burns more calories.

When you exercise aerobically, you move continuously to increase your heart rate. Your goal is to keep your heart rate elevated for a sustained period of time. How long you can exercise aerobically will depend on your fitness level. A general guideline is to work up to 20 to 30 minutes a day, three to four days a week.

Examples of aerobic exercise include walking, jogging, and biking. Many people prefer using machines, such as rowing machines, stair climbers, or treadmills.

Flexibility Exercises

Stretching will help you improve your range of motion and how well you can move. Flexibility exercises also help lessen muscle tension and soreness and reduce your risk for injury. Stretches for both your upper and lower body should be done at the end of every exercise session.

If improved flexibility is one of your fitness goals, specific activities, like yoga and tai chi, provide effective flexibility training.

Strength Training

Strength training is good for both your muscles and bones. Stronger bones and muscles reduce your risk for injury. In addition, increased muscle mass helps your body burn more calories when at rest. Being stronger also makes it easier to do everyday activities like carrying groceries or doing yard work.

The most common strength training methods are working with free weights and weight machines, or doing exercises that use your own body weight (push-ups, for example). If you are new to strength training, guidance from a personal trainer or online program can help ensure that you are maintaining proper form which will, in turn, reduce your risk of injury.

Establish a Reasonable Schedule

Both new and experienced exercisers benefit from following a schedule. Set a weekly exercise schedule that includes days off. For example, you might exercise every other day, with 3 days off each week.

Start with a program of moderate physical activity – perhaps 30 minutes a session. If 30 minutes is too much in the beginning, or you do not have enough time, break it up into shorter intervals. For instance, walk for 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes later in the day.

Stick with It

Focus on working toward your fitness goals gradually. Consider tracking your progress with a simple chart, perhaps listing the number of minutes you exercise each day. Your progress will start to show in the way you feel physically, and in how you feel emotionally.

There are many things you can do to help you stick with your exercise program.

- Keep exercise interesting by varying your routine. Do aerobic training on one day, then strength training the next. Mix it up with different activities such as walking, bicycle riding, an exercise class, or working in the garden.
- Do not stop exercising if you have muscle soreness. Some muscle soreness the day after you exercise is typical. This often occurs when you begin a fitness program, or when you increase the intensity of your exercise. Soreness will go away as you exercise regularly. If you experience severe pain and swelling, however, stop exercising and rest.
- Exercising with a friend often helps both people stay motivated and on track.
- Work towards an exercise goal, such as finishing a 5k run or participating in a group hiking trip.
- Choose a comfortable time of day to exercise. Do not exercise outdoors at mid-day when it is the warmest. Try not to work out too soon after a meal.
- Do not stop your fitness program – the benefits from exercise begin to diminish in 2 weeks and disappear in 2 to 8 months.
- Congratulate yourself for each accomplishment.

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