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## Physical Activity

Maintaining physical fitness benefits people at every stage of life.



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Physical activity is essential to maintaining and improving health. The human body was designed to move, yet being active throughout the day is an increasing challenge in modern lifestyles. In the United States, only half of adults get the amount of daily exercise recommended to reduce and prevent chronic diseases, even though one in two adults lives with a chronic disease. Staying physically active can have profound benefits at every stage of life, regardless of sex, race, ethnicity or current fitness level.

### Health Benefits of Physical Activity

Exercise has immediate and long-term benefits to both physical and mental health for healthy individuals, people at risk of developing chronic diseases and people with

chronic conditions or disabilities. In the short-term, regular physical activity reduces anxiety and blood pressure and improves sleep. It can elevate mood, increase energy and give people a chance to have fun with friends and family.

The long-term benefits of regular exercise extend beyond calorie balance and weight maintenance. Physical activity has a wide-ranging impact on health:

- Lower risk of early death
- Lower risk of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes and stroke
- Improved cholesterol
- Improved aerobic capacity and muscle strength and endurance
- Improved brain health and cognition
- Reduced risk of falls

Regular exercise has also been shown to positively affect digestion and prevent the normal decline of metabolism that occurs as part of the aging process. Exercise helps maintain lean muscle mass; replacing inactive fat stores with active lean muscle mass allows extra calories to be burned even when sedentary. Physical activity has also been shown to improve insulin sensitivity, which can keep blood sugar in a healthy range.



## Types of Physical Activity

The best kind of physical activity for an individual is one that can be sustained and enjoyed. It is important to incorporate different types of physical activity to obtain the most benefits from exercise:

- **Aerobic or Cardiovascular Exercise:** Aerobic activities improve heart and lung health, increase stamina, decrease body fat and improve circulation. Walking, jogging, bicycling, climbing stairs, dancing and swimming are all aerobic.

- **Strength or Weight Training:** Strength or weight training increases muscle mass, boosts metabolism, improves balance and makes bones stronger. Strength training can be done at home or in a gym.
- **Stretching:** Stretching eases movement, improves flexibility and prevents muscle strain and injury. Stretching also helps the body warm up before exercise.
- **Balance:** Activities that challenge stability help maintain posture and can prevent falls.

## Duration

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommends adults get 150 minutes (two hours and 30 minutes) of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every week. The 150 minutes can be spread out through the week—like exercising for 20–25 minutes every day or working out for 50 minutes, three times per week. Moderate exertion can be measured simply: a person should be able to talk but not sing. Strength training should be included in a routine as two 30-minute sessions a week.

## Sedentary Behavior

Sedentary behavior, characterized by a low level of energy expenditure while sitting, reclining or lying, is particularly harmful to human health. It increases risk of all-cause mortality, heart disease and heart disease mortality, type 2 diabetes, and cancer of the colon, endometrium and lung. Research shows that being sedentary for eight or more hours a day increases mortality risk at the same rate as smoking and obesity. This impact is lessened by 60–75 minutes of daily exercise; in fact, any exercise reduces the risk and is beneficial to health.

## Preschool-Age Children and Exercise

Children as young as age 3 are now included in official guidelines, with the recommendation that all children ages 3 through 5 years be physically active throughout the day for optimal growth and development.

## Kids and Physical Activity

Beginning at age 6 and through adolescence, children should get 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day to achieve maximum health benefits. This daily amount can be broken into smaller chunks of time, such as 30 minutes during recess and 30 minutes after school. Adolescence is a critical time for the development of peak bone mass. Muscle and bone-strengthening activities such as tug of war, climbing on playground equipment, tree climbing, jumping rope and gymnastics should be included as part of daily exercise. For teens, bone strengthening activities can include organized sports such as tennis, soccer and basketball or workouts like climbing stairs, jumping rope, hiking and lifting weights.

The specific benefits of exercise for children include reduced risk of depression, improved aerobic and muscular fitness, improved bone health, improved weight status and improved cardiometabolic health. Physical activity has also been shown to improve attention and some measure of academic success (with school physical activity programs).

## **Exercise and Aging**

Bodies lose strength and flexibility with age, and existing health conditions may make routine activities difficult. However, exercise can slow the physiological aging clock. Staying physically active in advancing years improves sleep, reduces fall risk, improves balance and joint mobility, extends years of active life, helps to slow bone and muscle loss and delays the onset of cognitive decline.

Activity guidelines are the same for adults and older adults with a few additions. Specific to older adults are the recommendations to include balance training in their weekly activities, keep effort levels relative to level of fitness and understand how any chronic conditions may affect their ability to do regular physical activity safely.

### **Tips for Staying Physically Active**

What is the best way to incorporate regular physical activity into a busy lifestyle? Here are some suggestions:

- Choose enjoyable activities.
- Find a partner to stay accountable.
- Turn inactive time into active time (e.g., sit-ups while watching TV).
- Take a 10-minute walk after lunch.
- Jog for 30 minutes instead of 20.
- Add weightlifting or resistance exercises.
- Vary activities (e.g., play basketball one day; bicycle the next).
- Commit to a realistic schedule.

Aim for progress, not perfection.

## Developing Personal Health Goals

Apply your knowledge of healthy eating + physical activity by developing your own personal goals.

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## Nutrition and Mental Health

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