

Health Benefits of Exercise: The Facts

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BE ACTIVE?

Health benefits of consistent exercise are endless for individuals of all ages. Moderate daily exercise will improve health in the following ways:

- **Help control weight.**
- **Reduce risk of premature death from heart disease.**
- **Cope with arthritis.**
- **Reduce risk of diabetes.**
- **Decrease high blood pressure or reduce risk of developing it.**
- **Help older adults gain strength, fight osteoporosis, and enhance ability to be active without fear of falling.**
- **Help maintain proper cholesterol levels.**

These reasons and more have motivated thousands of adults to maintain an active lifestyle.

“There is no medicine that can help overcome the range of conditions for which exercise has been prescribed: obesity, depression, diabetes, arthritis, hypertension, and coronary heart disease.”

– Dr. Walter Bortz, *Journal of American Geriatrics Society*

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Who needs to be active?

The loss of strength and stamina attributed to aging is in part caused by reduced physical activity. By age 75, about one in three men and one in two women do not engage in physical activity.

Research has shown that an active person who maintains a healthy diet will reduce the risk of developing or dying from some of the leading causes of illness and death in the United States. With this information, adults are aware of the benefits of regular activity, but few are jumping at the opportunity to begin their active lifestyles.

Why are so few people active?

It is a challenge to get moving because physical activity is less a part of life today. Fewer jobs require exertion.

“We have become a mechanically mobile society, relying on machines rather than muscle to get around.”
(U.S. Centers for Disease Control)

How much exercise do we need?

Adults can obtain health benefits with moderate physical activity.

“If you’re interested in improving your overall conditioning, health experts recommend that you should get at least 30 minutes of moderately intense physical activity on all or most days of the week. Examples of

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moderate activity include brisk walking, cycling, swimming or doing home repairs or yard work,” (MetLife Consumer Education Center). If you cannot exercise 30 minutes at one time, shorter amounts of active time two or three times a day can greatly improve health.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF REGULAR EXERCISE

Control weight

An important side effect of regular exercise is controlling body weight. Maintaining an appropriate weight makes coping with health problems more manageable.

Exercise is beneficial to weight control for several reasons.

- **It burns calories.** If a person takes in more calories than needed in a day, exercise offsets a caloric overload and controls body weight.
- **It speeds the rate of energy use,** resulting in increased metabolism. When metabolism increases through exercise, the individual will maintain the faster rate for longer periods of a day.
- **Muscle from trained athletes contains more fat-burning enzymes.** Untrained individuals who participate in endurance-type exercise will increase fat-burning enzymes. The increase results in the individual’s body burning more energy – even at rest.

Lower risk of heart disease

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, preventive strategies can significantly lower the risk of **coronary heart disease (CHD)**, the leading cause of death among both men and women. Increased activity is the lifestyle change most effective in preventing CHD. Brisk walking for three hours a week can reduce the risk of heart attacks by 30 to 40 percent.

An exercise program that works on **cardiovascular fitness** can be beneficial to heart health. Research shows that moderate physical activity is adequate to produce a significantly decreased risk of CHD. Moderate activity might involve participating in sports once a week or taking part in lower intensity activities – walking or gardening – more frequently.

Cope with Arthritis

The negative effects of arthritis can make even simple activities unbearable. **Exercise helps ease pain** caused by the disintegration of joint cartilage, increases range of movement, reduces fatigue, and enhances the feeling of wellness. Cartilage depends on movement to deliver oxygen and nutrients, so light aerobics, resistance training, and flexibility exercises improve joint condition.

The Surgeon General’s Report on Physical Activity and Health found, for persons with **osteoarthritis** (a degenerative joint disease) “regular physical activity

is necessary for maintaining normal muscle strength, joint structure, and joint function” ... and “was not associated with joint damage or development of osteoarthritis and may be beneficial for many people with arthritis.”

Other studies have found that persons with arthritis experienced improvement in muscle function and other important health benefits from exercise training. This was true even for **older adults who had arthritis.**

Prevent onset or control diabetes (Type II and Mature)

Exercising and maintaining a healthy weight **decrease the risk of developing the most common form of diabetes, Type II.** Moderate physical activity, even brisk walking, helps cells take in vital blood sugar. Most overweight people have excessive insulin in their body tissues. The excess, which is not used by the cells, can cause increased fat storage. Exercise helps the body’s cells to better utilize insulin and reduce the need for more. Losing weight also helps the body use insulin: Shedding just 10 to 20 pounds could be enough to control diabetes.

According to the American College of Sports Medicine, a patient with **Type II diabetes** should set a goal to expend a minimum of 1,000 calories of energy a week. Persons with diabetes should schedule at least three nonconsecutive

days of exercise each week, with 10 to 15 minutes in each session. **(Always check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.)**

Lower blood pressure

For most people, there is no single known cause of high blood pressure. **“Primary” or “essential” hypertension** cannot be cured, although in most cases it can be controlled.

Excess weight is one of the most common factors in high **blood pressure.** It creates added stress on the heart and lungs, forcing them to work harder. As body weight increases, blood pressure rises. Extra weight causes the individual to be two to six times more likely to develop high blood pressure than someone at a desirable weight.

A regular, moderate exercise program helps to control weight. When weight is lost or controlled, the heart and lungs do not have to work as hard to pump blood through the body. Exercise also **increases metabolism** and burns calories, thereby causing weight loss, reducing stress, and promoting good health.

Prevent osteoporosis and falls

An active lifestyle benefits bone density. **Weight-bearing activity** – as little as 30 minutes a day three days a week – increases mineral content in adult bones. Weight-bearing or resistance training is better for the spine than

ordinary walking. Through exercises that exert a load on bones, a person can increase muscle and bone strength, slowing deterioration.

Walking is less effective in building bone density, but is beneficial in **alleviating the risk of falling and fracturing bones**. Improving cardiovascular status and reducing body mass can improve balance. Strengthening leg muscles and ankles by walking also improves balance. The chance of serious injury from a fall decreases in those who are more fit. Developing flexibility, agility, grip strength, and balance also improves confidence and safety.

Lower cholesterol

Cholesterol is a pearly, fat-like substance. It is made in the liver for use in digestion, cell maintenance and hormonal processes. It is found in animal fats, oils, and many other things we eat, including milk and egg yolks. The body needs cholesterol to survive, but high amounts of bad cholesterol and saturated fats can be detrimental to health.

Exercise can significantly improve **blood cholesterol levels**, even without weight loss. A study at Duke University

showed that people participating in aerobic exercise four times a week – and adjusting diet to maintain weight – lowered their cholesterol. On average, low-density lipoproteins (LDL's, or “bad” cholesterol) lowered from 122 to 104 while the high-density lipoproteins (HDL's, or “good” cholesterol) rose from 32 to 37.

WHAT ACTIVITY IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

Every exercise is different and requires varying amounts of energy. Choose an activity you enjoy: walking, tennis, jogging, and bicycling are just a few choices. Work closely with your health care professional to select an activity that is right for you.

Changing small habits within current lifestyles can assist in gaining fitness.

- **Instead of driving to the post office, take a walk.**
- **Take the stairs, not the elevator.**
- **Do your own chores: mowing, raking, washing the car, or cleaning the house.**
- **Cut down on television viewing and enjoy the outside.**

These ideas, and many more, are simple ways to become more active every day.

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