

# Exercise: A Healthy Habit to Start and Keep

## How much exercise do I need?

Talk to your doctor about how much exercise is right for you. A good goal for many people is to work up to exercising 4 to 6 times a week for 30 to 60 minutes at a time. Remember, though, that exercise has so many benefits that any amount is better than none.

## How do I get started?

### Sneak exercise into your day

- Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Go for a walk during your coffee break or lunch.
- Walk all or part of the way to work.
- Do housework at a fast pace.
- Rake leaves or do other yard work.

Start by talking with your doctor. This is especially important if you haven't been active, if you have any health problems, or if you're pregnant or elderly.

Start out slowly. If you've been inactive for years, you can't run the Boston Marathon after 2 weeks of training. Begin with a 10-minute period of light exercise or a brisk walk every day and gradually increase how hard you exercise and for how long.

## How do I stick with it?

Here are some tips that will help you start and stick with an exercise program:

- **Choose something you like to do.** Make sure it suits you physically, too. For instance, swimming is easier on arthritic joints.
- **Get a partner.** Exercising with someone else can make it more fun.
- **Vary your routine.** You may be less likely to get bored or injured if you change your routine. Walk one day. Bicycle the next. Consider activities like dancing and racquet sports, and even chores like chopping wood.
- **Choose a comfortable time of day.** Don't work out too soon after eating or when it's too hot or cold outside. Wait until later in the day if you're too stiff in the morning.

- **Don't get discouraged.** It can take weeks or months before you notice some of the changes from exercise.
- **Forget "no pain, no gain."** While a little soreness is normal after you first start exercising, pain isn't. Stop if you hurt.
- **Make exercise fun.** Read, listen to music or watch TV while riding a stationary bicycle, for example. Find fun things to do, like taking a walk through the zoo. Go dancing. Learn how to play tennis.

## **Making exercise a habit**

- Stick to a regular time every day.
- Sign a contract committing yourself to exercise.
- Put "exercise appointments" on your calendar.
- Keep a daily log or diary of your activities.
- Check your progress. Can you walk a certain distance faster now than when you began? Or is your heart rate slower now?
- Ask your doctor to write a prescription for your exercise program, such as what type of exercise to do, how often to exercise and for how long.
- Think about joining a health club. The cost gives some people an incentive to exercise regularly.

## **How can I prevent injuries?**

Start every workout with a warm-up. That will make your muscles and joints more flexible. Spend 5 to 10 minutes doing some light calisthenics and stretching exercises, and perhaps brisk walking. Do the same thing when you're done working out--until your heart rate returns to normal.

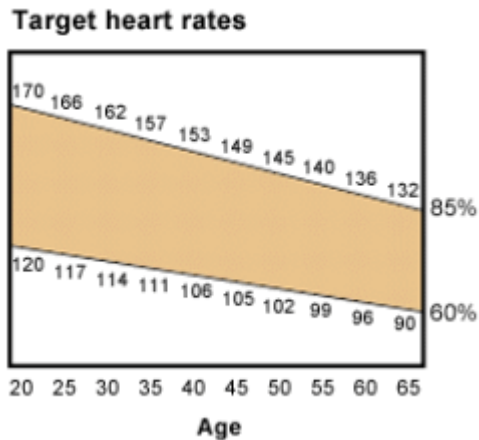
Pay attention to your body. Stop exercising if you feel very out of breath, dizzy, faint or nauseated, or have pain.

## **Benefits of regular exercise**

- Reduces your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, diabetes and obesity
- Keeps joints, tendons and ligaments flexible so it's easier to move around
- Reduces some of the effects of aging
- Contributes to your mental well-being and helps treat depression
- Helps relieve stress and anxiety
- Increases your energy and endurance
- Helps you sleep better

- Helps you maintain a normal weight by increasing your metabolism (the rate you burn calories)

## What is a target heart rate?



Measuring your heart rate (beats per minute) can tell you how hard your heart is working. You can check your heart rate by counting your pulse for 15 seconds and multiplying the beats by 4.

The chart to the right shows the target heart rates for people of different ages. When you're just beginning an exercise program, shoot for the lower target heart rate (60%). As your fitness improves, you can exercise harder to get your heart rate closer to the top number (85%).

## What is aerobic exercise?

Aerobic exercise is the type that moves large muscle groups and causes you to breathe more deeply and your heart to work harder to pump blood. It's also called cardiovascular exercise. It improves the health of your heart and lungs.

Examples include walking, jogging, running, aerobic dance, bicycling, rowing, swimming and cross-country skiing.

## What is weight-bearing exercise?

The term weight-bearing is used to describe exercises that work against the force of gravity. Weight-bearing exercise is important for building strong bones. Having strong bones helps prevent osteoporosis and bone fractures later in life.

Examples of weight-bearing exercises include walking, jogging, hiking, climbing stairs, dancing and weight training.

## **What about weight training?**

Weight training, or strength training, builds strength and muscles. Calisthenics like push-ups are weight-training exercises too. Lifting weights is a weight-training exercise. If you have high blood pressure or other health problems, talk to your family doctor before beginning weight training.

## **What is the best exercise?**

The best exercise is the one that you will do. Walking is considered one of the best choices because it's easy, safe and cheap. Brisk walking can burn as many calories as running, but is less likely than running or jogging to cause injuries. And it doesn't require any training or special equipment, except for good shoes.

Walking is an aerobic and weight-bearing exercise, so it is good for your heart and helps prevent osteoporosis.

## **Source**

[Written by familydoctor.org editorial staff.](#)

American Academy of Family Physicians

Reviewed/Updated: 04/05

Created: 01/96