

Physical Activity and You (for Adults)

Revised by Lourdes Olivas¹

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Physical activity is one of the best things you can do for your health. Combined with eating well, exercise is what your body (and mind) need—just what the doctor ordered. It's a simple fact: **Physical activity enhances your health physically and mentally.** It can even help you feel better right away because it can boost your mood, sharpen your focus, reduce stress, and improve your sleep. Even more, it can reduce the risk of chronic conditions like diabetes, arthritis, certain cancers, and dementia.

OK, so what does “being physically active” mean, and how will it help my health? “Being physically active” means moving your body—walking, dancing, swimming, biking, gardening, jogging, doing housework. You can create opportunities to move on a daily basis; for example, climbing stairs instead of taking an elevator, parking your car farther from your shopping destination so you can walk that extra distance, riding a stationary bicycle or doing resistance exercises while watching TV, walking or biking to school or work, pushing a stroller around the block, or playing at the park with your children. There are different ways to be physically active and different levels or intensities of physical activity. Plus, there are recommendations by health experts as to just how physically active you should be based on your personal situation.

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PHYSICAL ACTIVITY RECOMMENDATIONS

Moderate Intensity: Scientifically, we know that physical activity of moderate intensity makes you feel better and improves your health. For substantial health benefits, it's necessary to do at least 2.5 to 5 hours a week, such as walking briskly, raking leaves, mowing your lawn, gardening, or wheeling yourself in your wheelchair. If you are breathing hard during an activity but can still easily carry on a conversation, you've hit on a moderate-intensity physical activity.

Vigorous Intensity: If you're up to it, there are also vigorous activities you can engage in. If you're able to, aim for 75 minutes a week. These activities can include jogging, running, aerobics (including water), swimming laps, or playing team sports such as basketball, volleyball, or soccer.

If you're able to say a few words before you have to take a breath, you've hit on vigorous-intensity physical activity. The ideal time period for these activities will vary (for example, from 15 to 30 minutes or more) depending on factors such as your

age, weight, your body's condition, and the effort you put into the activity.

If you're not at current levels of recommended activity, start out light (less than moderate intensity) and work your way up gradually to a moderate-intensity level of activity. Stay committed by setting realistic short-term goals, pacing yourself, trying different physical activities to find something you enjoy, and perhaps partnering up with a friend for some of your activities (such as walking, biking, or swimming).

Being physically active helps you develop and maintain a more durable heart, blood vessels, and muscles, and also increases muscular strength and flexibility. Being physically active improves your body's functioning, balances how much fat you have versus how much muscle you have, and helps you manage your weight. All of this contributes to a healthier you while reducing your risk of dying from conditions like heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Studies have also shown that physical activity can reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, and improve mood and overall psychological well-being. In short, physical activity makes your life longer and more enjoyable.

ENDURANCE, STRENGTH, AND FLEXIBILITY

Physical activity enhances your endurance, strength, and flexibility, all of which play a part in physical fitness.

Cardiovascular Endurance/Aerobic: Your heart and its vascular system (veins, arteries, and capillaries) make up your cardiovascular system, which needs a certain level of endurance for you to reach optimal levels of physical activity (for example, 30 minutes or so of moderate-level physical activity almost every day). The harder you exert, the more your cardiovascular system needs to endure (that is, supply your body with the blood and oxygen it needs as you exercise harder and harder). Your lungs also play an important part by interacting with the cardiovascular system to move oxygen throughout your body. Gradually and comfortably increasing your physical activity level strengthens your cardiovascular system and lungs, allowing them to do more and more of what you're asking them to do during exercise, and makes them stronger even when you're resting.

Muscular Endurance:

Muscular endurance is your muscles' ability to do what you ask them to do when you have increased your physical activity. Muscular endurance needs to be developed and maintained. The more you exert your muscles, the more they need to endure (that is, keep up the work you're asking them to do). Increasing your moderate/vigorous physical activity will in turn enhance your muscle endurance, making your muscles more durable (longer lasting).

Muscle Strength: Muscle strength refers to a muscle's ability to exert force—like a push against the floor (as in a pushup) or lifting an object (as in lifting weights in weight training). Another example is a sit-up, where your stomach muscles must exert force to change your lying down position to one of sitting up. Resistance exercises (e.g., elastic band exercises) will also strengthen muscles. Strengthening muscle enhances its tone and increases its mass while reducing fat. Did you know that you begin to lose muscle mass at age 30? "If you don't use it, you will lose it!"

Muscle Flexibility: Flexibility refers to the range of movement of your muscles and joints. Basic stretching exercises will increase the blood supply to your joints, which improves your flexibility. Simply put, flexibility helps to improve physical performance (for example, muscle coordination) and decrease the likelihood of injury. Warm up the body before stretching with gentle joint rotations and light aerobic activity (for example, about 5 minutes of fast walking or slow jogging—something to get your blood pumping). Yoga is an example of a good systematic approach to stretching various muscles of the body. Never overstretch.

Aerobic activity for cardiovascular endurance:

- Desired goal: 3–5 days per week, at least 150 minutes (2.5 hours) per week.
- Start out with light to moderate intensity.
- Anything that gets your heart beating faster counts.



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Muscle strength training*

- Desired goal: 2–3 days per week.
- Target major muscle groups.
- Do activities that make your muscles work harder than usual.
- Resistance bands are an alternative to weights for muscle strengthening.

***Precaution:** Weight training may be dangerous if performed improperly. To prevent injuries, consult an experienced trainer before starting a weightlifting program, as well as your physician.

Flexibility:

Engage in flexibility exercises 3 days per week (e.g., 30–45 minutes of yoga). Overall, aim to move more throughout your day and sit less because research has shown that spending more time being inactive and sitting is harmful for your health!

SOURCES

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Consult with your doctor about becoming more physically active if you have any medical conditions, such as diabetes, heart trouble, high blood pressure, arthritis, or obesity. Also consult your doctor if you are pregnant or over 35 years old and physically inactive.

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