

The Benefits of Exercise

Millions of Americans simply aren't moving enough to meet the minimum threshold for good health — that is, burning at least 700 to 1,000 calories a week through physical pursuits. The benefits of exercise may sound too good to be true, but decades of solid science confirm that exercise improves health and can extend your life. Adding as little as half an hour of moderately intense physical activity to your day can help you avoid a bunch of serious ailments, including heart disease, diabetes, depression, and several types of cancer, particularly breast and colon cancers. Regular exercise can also help you sleep better, reduce stress, control your weight, brighten your mood, sharpen your mental functioning, and improve your sex life.

A well-rounded exercise program has four components: aerobic activity, strength training, flexibility, and balance exercises. Each benefits your body in a different way.

I would highly recommend reading Chapters 13-16 in Dr. A's Habits of Health. He goes into great detail on how to transition your body into a state of increased energy expenditure. Because in essence what we want to do is get you moving so that you will burn more calories inside and out.

Do you know that you can fight disease with aerobic activity?

Nearly all of the research regarding the disease-fighting benefits of exercise revolves around cardiovascular activity, which includes walking, jogging, swimming, and cycling. When you perform aerobic activity, it is recommended that you work out at moderate intensity. This level of activity is safe for almost everyone and provides the desired health benefits.

Do you know you can protect your bones with strength training?

Strength or resistance training, such as elastic-band workouts and the use of weight machines or free weights, are important for building muscle and protecting bone.

Bones lose calcium and weaken with age, but strength training can help slow or sometimes even reverse this trend. Not only can strength training make you look and feel better, but it can also result in better performance of everyday activities, such as climbing stairs and carrying bundles. Stronger muscles also mean better mobility and balance, and thus a lower risk of falling and injuring yourself. In addition, more lean body mass aids in weight control because each pound of muscle burns more calories than its equivalent in fat.

Do you know you can ease back pain with flexibility exercises?

Stretching or flexibility training is the third prong of a balanced exercise program. Muscles tend to shorten and weaken with age. Shorter, stiffer muscle fibers make you vulnerable to injuries, back pain, and stress. But regularly performing exercises that isolate and stretch the elastic fibers surrounding your muscles and tendons can counteract this process. And stretching improves your posture and balance.

Do you know that you can prevent falls with balance exercises?

Balance tends to erode over time and regularly performing balance exercises is one of the best ways to protect against falls that lead to temporary or permanent disability. Balance exercises take only a few minutes and often fit easily into the warm-up portion of a workout. Many strength-training exercises also serve as balance exercises.

20 suggestions for ways to become a little bit more physically active

- Take the far away spot. Walking from the farthest corner of the parking lot will burn a few calories. If it's a parking garage, head for the roof and use the stairs.
- Walk to the next stop. If you take a bus or train, don't wait at the nearest stop. Walk to the next one. Or, at the end of your journey, get off a stop early and finish up on foot.
- Hang loose. During your bus or train trip, stand and don't hold on too tightly. You'll improve your sense of balance and build up your "core" back and abdominal muscles.
- Walk and talk. If you are a member of a book group, propose 15 to 20 minutes of walking discussion of the book before you sit down and chat.
- Walk while you watch. Soccer moms, dads, and grandparents can circle the field several times during a game and not miss a single play.
- Walk tall. Maintaining good posture — chest out, shoulders square but relaxed, stomach in — will help keep your back and abdominal muscles in shape. Besides, you'll just look a whole lot healthier if you don't slouch (mom was right).
- Adopt someone as your walking, jogging, or biking buddy. Adding a social element to exercise helps many people stick with it.
- That buddy might have four legs. Several studies have shown that dog owners get more exercise than the canine-less.

- Be part of the fun. Adults shouldn't miss a chance to jump into the fray if kids are playing on a playground or splashing around in the water. Climbing on the jungle gym (be careful!) and swinging on a swing will strengthen muscles and bones and set a good example.
- Put on your dancing shoes. Exercise doesn't have to be done in a straight line. Dancing can get your heart going and helps with balance. Dance classes tend to have lower dropout rates than gyms. Or just turn up the volume at home and boogie.
- Wash and dry the dishes by hand. The drying alone is a mini-workout for the arms.
- Clean house. Even if you have a cleaning service, you can take responsibility for vacuuming a couple of rooms yourself. Fifteen minutes burns around 80 calories. Wash some windows and do some dusting and you've got a pretty decent workout — and a cleaner house.
- Hide that remote. Channel surfing can add hours to screen time. If you have to get up to change the channel, you are more likely to turn it off and maybe do something else that's less sedentary.
- Go swimming somewhere. Swimming is great exercise if you have arthritis because the water supports your weight, taking the load off of joints. The humid air around a pool sometimes makes breathing more comfortable for people with lung problems.
- Don't e-mail. In the office, get out of your chair, walk down the hallway, and talk to the person. At home, write an old-fashioned letter and walk to a mailbox — and not the nearest one — to mail it.
- Stand up when you're on the phone. Breaking up long periods of sitting has metabolic benefits. Even standing for a minute or two can help.
- Think small. Small bouts of activity are better than knocking yourself out with a workout that will be hard to replicate.
- Be a stair master. Take the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator whenever you can. It's good for your legs and knees, and your cardiovascular health will benefit from the little bit of huffing and puffing. Don't overdo. One flight at a time.
- Stairs tip #2. You'll give the gluteal muscles a nice little workout if you can climb up two stairs at a time.
- Stairs tip #3. You can give your calf muscles a nice little stretch by putting the ball of the foot on the stair and lowering your heel.