

Exercising your way to better health

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Your body was made to move. Daily physical activity reduces the risk of heart disease by improving blood circulation throughout your body. It also can keep your weight under control, improve blood cholesterol levels, prevent and manage high blood pressure, relieve stress, improve self-image, boost energy levels, increase muscle strength, prevent bone loss and increase optimism by countering depression. In older people, exercise helps delay or prevent chronic illnesses and diseases associated with aging and maintains quality of life and independence longer.

Vigorous aerobic activities are best for improving the fitness of your heart and lungs. These include brisk walking, running, swimming, skiing, bicycling and jumping rope. But even low-intensity activities, when done for as little as 30 minutes a day, will improve your health. So grab a rake and till the garden, or scrub the kitchen floor. You might even borrow your neighbor's poodle and go for a stroll, or dance!

Break out your walking shoes

Walking is the easiest and most convenient form of exercise, and here's the best part: it's free! Studies show that women who walk four or more hours per week have 41 percent fewer hip fractures than women who walk less than one hour a week. Also, a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that sedentary women ages 65 and older who began walking a mile a day cut their rates of death from all causes by 50 percent.



Unfortunately, many people who start a new exercise program drop out within a couple of months, claiming they're too busy or simply bored with the routine, says American Council on Exercise spokeswoman Debi Pillarella, MEd, CPT.

"If it's not fun, then the likelihood of it becoming part of life for the long haul is significantly reduced," Pillarella says. To counter the boredom, she suggests taking a class. "Research shows that people who take exercise classes do a better job adhering to their exercise program than those who go it alone."

Or play. Exercise isn't just push-ups, sit-ups and walking on a treadmill. Playing softball, joining a tennis league, running around with your kids, "all are great ways to get exercise in a fun way," she says.

Finally, providing yourself with realistic exercise goals and rewarding yourself for achieving those goals makes working out a lot more fun. To reward herself, Pillarella puts \$1 in a jar each time she works out and sets a goal of four to six workouts a week. "This allows me to get a pedicure almost monthly," she says.

But whatever you decide to do, keep in mind that if you've been sedentary for a long time, are overweight, have a high risk of coronary heart disease or some other chronic health problem, the American Heart Association recommends that you see your doctor for a medical evaluation before beginning a physical activity program.

MYTH: You have to be a marathoner to see health benefits

FACT: Research continues to show that any amount of exercise, at any age, is always better than no exercise. In general, the more you do, the greater the benefits. "Many newcomers to exercise can begin to achieve health benefits by accumulating a minimum of 60 minutes in a week," Pillarella says.



>> For more easy exercise tips, visit www.acefitness.org or www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/everyone.htm

MYTH: It's too late for me to start

FACT: You don't want to jump from the couch to the treadmill all at once, but it's never too late to start exercising. In older adults, a little exercise goes a long way toward imparting health benefits, and the more you do, the greater the health benefits. Of course, if you have a chronic condition, such as heart disease, cancer or diabetes, you'll want to check with your doctor first for any precautions you'll need to take.

MYTH: No pain, no gain

FACT: A sensible exercise program might be uncomfortable, but it should not be painful. If exercise hurts, you're doing something wrong.

MYTH: Exercise takes up way too much of my free time

FACT: Exercise doesn't have to be done in one long session. You can break it up throughout the day, or sneak it into your activities. Instead of jockeying for the best parking spots, choose the ones farthest away. Carry that gallon of milk to your car instead of using the cart. Take the stairs instead of the elevator whenever you can. During TV commercials, get up and walk around the house or run-in-place for two minutes. At the office, when you need to talk to co-workers, do it the old-fashioned way — get up out of your chair and visit them in person. They'll be pleasantly surprised and you'll benefit from the movement.

Fact
Nearly 40 percent of Americans ages 55 and older report no leisure-time physical activity



American Public Health Association