

Living healthier through low-impact exercise

By Julia Haskins

When you picture exercise, what comes to mind? Is it someone running a marathon? Maybe they're doing jumping jacks. Those are both great forms of exercise. But if those exercises aren't quite right for you, don't sweat it — literally. High-impact workouts aren't the only way to be physically active.

Low-impact exercise offers many of the same health benefits as more physically demanding workouts, and may even be better for you in some cases.

There are also many reasons why people may not be able to take on high-impact exercise. If you're looking for a workout that's effective but manageable for daily activity, give low-impact exercise a try.

Exercise is measured by relative intensity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines relative intensity as the

amount of effort needed to carry out an activity, which affects your heart rate and breathing. One way to understand relative intensity is using the talk test. If you're able to talk with relative ease while exercising, you're probably doing a form of low-impact exercise, such as walking or biking at a brisk pace, water aerobics or light gardening. It's harder to chat when you're doing a high-impact activity such as running or jumping rope.

"Low-impact exercise is generally defined as low load or low weight-bearing," says Jacque Crockford, MS, CSCS, a certified personal trainer and exercise physiology content manager at the American Council on Exercise. "It excludes exercise like running and jumping, which place additional pressure on joints during motion."

Low-impact exercise can be low-, moderate- or high-intensity. CDC recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week as well as muscle-strengthening, flexibility and balance exercises.

Don't let the name fool you — low-impact exercise can be every bit as beneficial as high-impact exercise. Regular, moderate-intensity exercise can help you reach important health goals such as maintaining a healthy weight and reducing the risk of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and some cancers as well as strengthening bones and muscles, according to CDC. Keeping up an exercise regimen can also have a positive impact on your mental health and lift your mood.

Not only does low-impact exercise come with the benefits of improved strength, lower blood pressure and reduced stress, but such a workout also cuts down on the risk of musculoskeletal injury, Crockford adds.

That's what makes low-impact exercise a great option for virtually everyone. Some people physically can't do a high-impact workout that involves a lot of running or jumping, for example. And that's OK. If you can take some time each day for Pilates, yoga



or even a round of golf, you'll be well on your way to better physical and mental health. Moderate-intensity exercise is especially beneficial for people who need to be gentler on their bodies, such as seniors, people who are pregnant and people with arthritis.

CDC has specific recommendations for people with arthritis, which encourage them to go slowly, modify activities when arthritis symptoms worsen, choose joint-friendly activities, find safe places to exercise and talk to a health professional or certified exercise specialist.

Even if you don't have a chronic health condition, low-impact exercise is a great way to get in the swing of a regular exercise routine.

You can start with some light gardening, and over time, transition to some more challenging outdoor work. You could go on a walk every day with the goal of eventually jogging a few times a week. Just remember that all bodies and needs are different. Some people's exercise regimens mostly consist of moderate-intensity physical activity, which is still incredibly beneficial to overall health and wellness.

Even though low-impact exercise is gentler on the body, it's important to talk to your doctor before taking on a new physical activity regimen. People with musculoskeletal injuries, arthritis and other mobility issues in particular need to know how to safely work out to prevent additional injury, Crockford notes. Talk to your doctor about your goals for exercise as well as overall health and wellness. They can even suggest exercises that are appropriate for you.

>> For more low-impact exercise tips, visit www.acefitness.org.



Shake up your low-impact workout

One of the best parts about low-impact exercise is that it lets you get creative with your workouts. No matter what you do, make it something you actually like, Crockford says.

"Regardless of the physical activity you choose, the exercise you enjoy is most likely to be the one you keep doing, promoting long-term health," she adds. Don't know where to begin? Here are some ideas to inspire you:

- ◆ Put on your dancing shoes for a tango or ballroom lesson.
- ◆ Head to the park for a mentally stimulating tai chi session.
- ◆ Strap on your helmet and padding for a round of in-line or rollerskating.
- ◆ Grab a partner for tennis doubles, or do some laps in the pool.

