

# A Brief Guide to Increasing Physical Activity

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One of the major risk factors for several serious medical conditions, including heart disease, stroke, and diabetes, is physical inactivity. Despite this well-documented link, the National Center for Health Statistics has found that only a little over half of American adults meet the federal physical activity guidelines for aerobic activity through leisure-time activity (150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity), with African American and Hispanic/Latino adults having rates lower than non-Hispanic/Latino white adults. Clearly, there is a need for more programs to educate adults about the health benefits of increased physical activity and to provide ongoing encouragement and support for maintaining regular individualized programs of exercise.

Although regular exercise is safe for most adults, even those with chronic conditions, it is always advisable to check with your health provider before embarking on a new exercise program. Once you have been medically cleared, you are ready to begin. The best way to start is to take the time to develop a plan for a program of physical activity that you will be able to enjoy and sustain for years.

### **Step 1: Be clear about your motivation and readiness.**

- Why do you believe it is important to become more physically active?
- What are the benefits of becoming more active?
- How is your life likely to be affected if you do not increase your physical activity?
- Are you ready to make it a priority?

When identifying the benefits, think of both long-term and short-term benefits. By increasing your physical activity, you are increasing the odds of preventing various medical conditions, or at least minimizing their impact, and living longer, but you are also likely to experience more immediate benefits, including greater endurance that will enable you to engage in more activities you enjoy. Increased activity is also usually associated with improved mood and a greater sense of well-being. Make a list of these benefits and refer back to it often.

### **Step 2: Look back over the past few years to gain a better understanding of why you have not been active enough.**

- Was there a time when you were physically active?
- What activities did you enjoy then?
- Why did you stop or decrease your activity?
- What are the obstacles that have kept you from being active recently?
- How can you overcome or work around these obstacles?

Be as specific as you can. If lack of time has been the major obstacle, what responsibilities or activities are creating the problem? Which of these can be dropped, reduced, or shifted? Can you identify times when you could substitute physical activity for a passive activity (e.g., a walk around the neighborhood instead of watching a television program)?

**Step 3: Select the right activity.** As you consider options, it is important that you find an activity that fits your schedule, living situation, and finances. You do not have to join a fitness club or buy expensive equipment to become more physically fit. Nor do you have to become a marathon runner. For example, if you do not have easy access to exercise facilities, walking regularly around your neighborhood or in a park or on the track at a nearby school could be an option, and all that is required is a good pair of walking shoes.

- Choose an activity you enjoy. You are much more likely to be able to stick with an activity that is fun or interesting for you. If you find a particular activity difficult or boring, try another one.
- If it is easier to be physically active when you have others with you, ask a friend to join you or find a group activity, perhaps an exercise class at a recreation center.
- Develop a specific plan and write it down. Then make a commitment, in writing, to follow your plan. For example:
  - What are you going to do? Brisk walking
  - Where will you do it? In the neighborhood
  - When will you do it? In the evening, instead of watching one of my television programs
- Set reasonable, specific goals. Do not be overly ambitious at the start. Although you may want to eventually achieve the recommended goal of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity a week, that doesn't need to be your initial goal. For example, you can start with the goal of a 10-minute brisk walk three evenings every week, then gradually add more time and distance.
- Enlist the support of family and friends. Explain why it is important for you to begin and stay with this program. Ask for their ongoing encouragement and support.
- Keep track of your activity. A simple activity log can help you identify what is working well with your plan and where you may need to make adjustments. It also can give you a sense of accomplishment.
- Plan for interruptions, both scheduled (e.g., vacations) and unscheduled (e.g., illnesses). There is no need to feel guilty when these interruptions occur, but make a commitment to get back to your activity plan as soon as possible.

In addition to your primary plan for increasing physical activity, search for other opportunities to add some physical activity to your daily routine. For example:

- When possible, take the stairs instead of the elevator
- Use work breaks or part of your lunch break to take a walk
- Park your car farther from the store when shopping
- If you use the bus or subway, get off one or two stops before your regular one