

Why Exercise?



There's no question about it: Physical activity can help any of us live longer, healthier lives. Even people who have specific risk factors, such as high blood pressure or smoking, can benefit from regular physical activity and make gains in their health.

A well-rounded exercise program will incorporate three elements:

- Aerobic conditioning, which strengthens your heart and vascular system (for example, running, swimming, rowing, racquet sports, and so on)
- Strength training, using either free weights, weight machines, or the weight of your body (such as push-ups)
- Flexibility training, which aids your joints and tendons (for example, stretching or yoga)

Before you start

For most people, physical activity should not pose any problem or hazard.

But if you are over 40 or have specific health concerns, you may want to consult with your health care provider before starting any new exercise program.

PAR-Q (physical activity readiness questionnaire) is a set of questions designed to identify the small number of adults for whom physical activity might be inappropriate or those who should seek medical advice concerning the most suitable type of activity. Common sense is your best guide in answering these questions. Read them carefully and answer them honestly to yourself.

- Yes No** Has your doctor ever said you have heart trouble?
- Yes No** Do you frequently have pains in your heart and chest?
- Yes No** Do you often feel faint or have spells of severe dizziness?

- Yes No** Has a doctor ever said your blood pressure was too high?
- Yes No** Has your doctor ever told you that you have a bone or joint problem such as arthritis that has been aggravated by exercise, or might be made worse with exercise?
- Yes No** Is there a good physical reason not mentioned here why you should not follow an activity program even if you wanted to?
- Yes No** Are you over age 65 and not accustomed to vigorous exercise?

If you answered YES to one or more questions, consult with your personal physician before increasing your physical activity.

If you answered NO to all questions honestly, you have reasonable assurance of your present suitability for increasing your activity level.

What kind of exercise?

Today there are more ways to exercise and places to do so than ever before. They include health and fitness clubs, local recreation centers, dance and yoga centers, and of course, your own home.

The question of where to exercise is closely linked to the kind of exercise that appeals to you. Are you someone who prefers to exercise alone? Does a partner motivate you? What about an entire group? Are you competitive by nature? Do you enjoy the outdoors? Do seasonal activities interest you? Do you relish the challenge of learning a new skill? Are you passionate about one sport or one form of exercise, or do you need variety? Here are a few ideas to consider:

- Walking is one of the safest and simplest ways you can exercise, and is something you can do every day. It's also economical—all you need is a good pair of walking shoes. You can walk alone or with a buddy, indoors or out. If poor weather means you will be walking inside a lot, check your community for locations. Malls frequently offer walking programs; schools and recreation centers may have walking tracks open to the public. Walking can be done at a moderate pace, but can be intensified when you are ready.
- Home exercise equipment comes in a wide variety, as do exercise programs on DVD and television. If your schedule is tight or you need to be at home, this may be a good option for you. Equipment ranges from complete home gyms to simple exercise balls.
- Individual classes in everything from tai chi to kickboxing are available in many communities. These make a good adjunct to another exercise routine, providing fresh activities as needed.
- Gym or health club memberships work for many people. A reputable, well-run facility offers the advantage of varied activities, qualified staff, and solid equipment.

How much should I do?

However you choose to exercise, moderation is key. Remember, you are in this for the long run and can build speed, force, and intensity over time. Every exercise session should begin with a warm-up of five minutes. Don't start with stretching, but with low-intensity aerobic exercise, like marching in place or walking on a treadmill. Then proceed to gentle stretching.

The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons suggests the "10 percent rule": that is, increase the frequency, duration, or intensity of your workout by no more than 10 percent in a week. This is a helpful guideline whether you measure miles you walk or the amount of weight you lift.

The benefits of cross-training

Cross-training is simply the practice of including different types of activity in your exercise program, rather than focusing exclusively on one activity. Cross-training has many advantages:

- Because different activities use different muscle groups, cross-training gives you a balanced approach to fitness.
- Cross-training can help you avoid the boredom factor that stalls some people in their exercise plans.
- Because you won't use the same muscles all the time, you may be less prone to an "over-use" injury.
- If you do injure yourself while exercising, you are less likely to have to give up your entire exercise program.

A sample cross-training program:

- Three times a week: 30 minutes of aerobic exercises, alternating activities such as walking, swimming, and stair climbing
- Twice a week (not consecutive days): 30 minutes of strength training, working each major muscle group
- Every day: 5 to 10 minutes of stretching. It's also safe to walk every day.

Sources: American College of Sports Medicine, American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons

Need more information? Talk to your health care professional or call Mercy On Call, 358-2767 or 800-358-2767, 7 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week.



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