



Staying Active: Physical Activity and Exercise

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What are the benefits of physical activity?

Physical activity benefits your body in many ways. Being active

- strengthens your muscles
- increases your flexibility
- gives you more energy
- helps control your weight
- helps build and maintain strong bones
- helps prevent or reduce the risk of major diseases, such as **cardiovascular disease**, **diabetes mellitus**, and certain types of cancer
- relieves stress, improves sleep quality, and can help ease **depression** and anxiety

What is aerobic activity?

Aerobic activities (“cardio”) are ones in which you move large muscles of the body (like those in the legs and arms) in a rhythmic way. This type of activity strengthens your heart and blood vessels. Aerobic activity also burns **calories**, which helps you lose weight or maintain your weight.

Are there different levels of aerobic activity?

There are different levels of intensity when it comes to aerobic activity. Intensity is the amount of effort an activity takes. Moderate intensity means you are moving enough to raise your heart rate and start sweating. You can still talk normally, but you cannot sing. Examples of moderate-intensity activity are brisk walking and riding a bike slower than 10 mph. A vigorous-intensity activity is one in which it is hard to talk without pausing for breath. Examples of vigorous-intensity activity are jogging and swimming laps.

What is muscle-strengthening activity?

Muscle-strengthening activities, also called strength training or resistance training, build muscle and slow bone loss. Activities that make your muscles and bones work harder than usual help to strengthen them. As you build muscle, your body will become more toned. The more muscle you have, the better your body is able to burn calories. Examples of muscle-strengthening activities include lifting weights, yoga, push-ups, and sit-ups.

A “repetition” is one complete movement of an activity. To get health benefits, do muscle-strengthening activities until it is hard to complete another repetition.

How much physical activity should I do each week?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that adults do 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity a week, along with muscle-strengthening activities on 2 days or more a week. Another option is to do 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity and 2 days of muscle-strengthening activity a week. Following these guidelines will give you important health benefits and help you maintain your weight. Exercising more—a total of 300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity a week—will help you lose weight and give you even more health benefits.

Do I have to do the weekly recommended amount of physical activity all at once?

No—you can divide the recommended amount of minutes into shorter workout sessions throughout the week. For example, you can do a 30-minute workout 5 days per week. You even can split each of those 30-minute workouts into smaller 10-minute periods throughout each day. Set up a routine that works best for you.

Can daily tasks count as physical activity?

Yes—choices you make in your daily life can help you meet the guidelines for physical activity. For example, walking or biking to work or gardening can count toward your weekly aerobic activity. Just remember that the activity has to be at least moderately intense and sustained for at least 10 minutes in order to count as exercise. For example, taking a short stroll around the parking lot is not enough. Make physical activity a priority and plan it with purpose.

Do I need to see a doctor before I start a physical activity program?

If you are in good health, you do not have to see your doctor before you begin a moderate physical activity program. However, you should talk with your doctor before starting a physical activity program if

- you have a chronic medical condition or are at increased risk of a medical condition
- you are pregnant
- you have a disability that makes it hard to meet physical activity guidelines

What are some good ways to start being physically active?

Working out in a group can help keep you motivated. Check with your local fitness clubs or community centers for exercise classes that interest you, such as yoga, Pilates, spinning, and dance. You also can consult a personal trainer or fitness instructor who will set a routine for you to follow. There also are many videos, apps, websites, books, and magazines available on exercise and fitness.

If it has been some time since you exercised regularly, or if you are overweight or obese, you should start gradually. Begin with as little as 5 minutes a day. Add 5 minutes each week until you can stay active for longer periods. Trying to do too much too soon can increase the risk of injury.

How can I stay safe during physical activity?

Injury during exercise is rare. However, you should still take steps to avoid injury:

- Find appropriate activities—Make sure you are doing activities that match your level of fitness. For example, if you are new to exercise, try starting with a moderate-intensity activity like brisk walking rather than a vigorous-intensity activity.
- Use the right equipment in the right way—Some activities need special gear or equipment. Make sure helmets and other gear fit properly. Learn to use exercise equipment safely.
- Work out in a safe place—Make sure you exercise in spaces that are well lit and well maintained.
- Adjust for the weather—Avoid exercising in extreme heat or cold. Move your workout inside if the weather is bad. To avoid the hottest part of the day, work out in the early morning or evening. Exercising in hot weather can increase your risk of heat stress and dehydration.
- Avoid excessive activity—Women who routinely exercise too much may get injuries because of repeated stress on their muscles and bones. One way to avoid injury is to rest on some days or alternate between vigorous and lighter activity. Another way is to cross-train, which means doing different activities, such as tennis and swimming.
- Warm up and cool down—Warming up and cooling down can be a helpful part of your exercise plan and may reduce the risk of injuries.

What are the warning signs that I should stop working out?

These signs indicate that you should stop working out or see a health care professional:

- Excessive muscle soreness or pain
- Pain
- Problems breathing
- Feeling very tired for the whole workout
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Faintness
- Dizziness
- Irregular heartbeat

Glossary

Calories: Units of heat used to express the fuel or energy value of food.

Cardiovascular Disease: Disease of the heart and blood vessels.

Depression: Feelings of sadness for periods of at least 2 weeks.

Diabetes Mellitus: A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

Physical Activity: Any movement made using the body's muscles and bones that uses more energy than the body at rest. Usually refers to the type of physical activity that enhances health. Exercise is one type of physical activity that is purposeful and planned with the goal of improving health and fitness.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

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