



Physical Activity for Health

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ABSTRACT *Physical activity is any activity that you may do that helps to improve or maintain your physical fitness as well as your health in general.*

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FOR HEALTH

Doing regular physical activity can make you feel good about yourself and it can have a number of benefits for your health. For example, it reduces the risk of developing heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, some cancers, type 2 diabetes and osteoporosis. Regular physical activity also helps to control weight, and may help to ease stress. Adults should aim to do a mixture of aerobic activities and muscle-strengthening activities. During the daytime, all age groups should minimize the amount of time spent being sedentary (sitting).

It can include:

- Everyday activities. For example, walking or cycling to work or school, doing housework, gardening or any active or manual work that you may do as part of your job.
- Active recreational activities. This includes activities such as dancing, active play amongst children, or walking or cycling for recreation.
- Sport. For example, exercise and fitness training at a gym or during an exercise class, swimming and competitive sports such as football, rugby and tennis, etc.

Current recommendations:

Under-5s:

- Physical activity should be encouraged from birth, particularly through floor-based play and water-based activities in safe environments.
- Children of pre-school age who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active daily for at least 180 minutes (3 hours), spread throughout the day.

Children and young people (aged 5-18 years):

- Children and teenagers should get at least 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per day. The 60 minutes can be made up from various shorter sessions and a mixture of different activities. For example, a mixture of play, Physical Education (PE) at school, games, dance, cycling, a brisk walk to school, sports, various outdoor activities, etc.
- There are many benefits to regular physical activity for children. It helps with healthy growth and development and, if children are physically active, they are less likely to become overweight, or obese, adults. A recent study found that teenagers who carry a gene for obesity are less likely to become overweight or obese if they are physically active for an hour a day. If an overweight child becomes an overweight or obese adult, they are more likely to develop health problems, including diabetes, stroke, heart disease and cancer.
- Regular physical activity also helps children to socialize and mix with others and helps with their psychological well-being. A study that took place in Southern California also found that children with average or above-average fitness levels did better in terms of their academic performance than children with below-average fitness levels. However, more studies are needed to confirm this poten-

tial benefit.

Adults (aged 16-64 years):

- Over a week, activity should add up to at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) of moderate intensity activity in bouts of 10 minutes or more. For example, 30 minutes on at least five days a week.
- Comparable benefits can be achieved by 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity spread across the week or combinations of moderate and vigorous intensity activity.

Pregnant women

- It is safe to continue to do some physical activity during pregnancy. However, the type of activity that you choose needs to be appropriate.

Older adults (aged 65 years and older):

- If you are over the age of 65 you should still aim to do the same amount of aerobic activity and muscle-strengthening activity as younger adults, depending on your ability. As well as this, a particular goal for older people should be, where possible, to do activities to help with flexibility and balance. This is to help reduce the risk of falls, and injury from falls. Examples of activities to help flexibility include yoga, housework such as vacuuming, dancing, tai chi or keep fit classes. Special keep fit classes for older people are available in many areas and will usually include activities for flexibility and balance.

Aerobic activities are any activity that makes your heart and lungs work harder. To gain health benefits, you should do at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most days of the week.

- 30 minutes is probably the minimum but you do not have to do this all at once. For example, cycling to work and back for 15 minutes each way adds up to 30 minutes. A recent study showed that even less time may have some health benefits.
- Moderate intensity physical activity means that you get warm, mildly out of breath, and mildly sweaty: brisk walking, jogging, swimming, cycling, dancing, badminton, tennis, etc. and normal activities that are part of your daily routine (everyday activities) may make up some of the 30 minutes: climbing the stairs, or gardening can make you mildly out of breath and mildly sweaty.
- On most days means that you cannot store up the benefits of physical activity. You need to do it regularly. Being physically active on at least five days a week is recommended.

Muscle-strengthening activities:

In addition to the above aerobic activities, adults should also aim to do a minimum of two sessions of muscle-strengthening activities per week, although these should not be on consecutive days. Muscle-strengthening activities can include

climbing stairs, walking uphill, lifting or carrying shopping, digging the garden, weight training, Pilates, yoga or similar resistance exercises that use the major muscle groups. Ideally, the activities and exercises should not only aim to improve or maintain your muscle strength, but also aim to maintain or improve your flexibility and balance.

What are the health benefits of physical activity?

The health benefits of doing regular physical activity have been shown in many studies. You are likely to get the most benefits to your health if you are someone who is not very active at all and you become more active. However, there are still benefits to be gained for anyone who increases their physical activity levels, even if they are already doing 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on most days. Overall, people who do the recommended levels of physical activity can reduce their risk of premature death by 20-30%.

There are only a few reasons why physical activity may be harmful. A common wrong belief is that physical activity may be bad for the heart. On the contrary, physical activity is good for most people with heart disease provided they follow guidelines given by exercise specialists or health professionals. In general, if you gradually build up to do regular moderate intensity physical activity, the potential benefits to your health will greatly outweigh the small risks involved.

Coronary heart disease: Your risk of developing coronary heart disease, such as angina or a heart attack, is much reduced if you are regularly physically active. Inactive people have almost double the risk of having a heart attack compared with those who are regularly physically active. If you already have heart disease, regular physical activity is usually advised as an important way to help prevent your heart disease from getting worse.

Stroke:

Physically active people are less likely to have a stroke. One study found that women aged 45 and older who walk briskly (at least three miles per hour), or who walk for more than two hours a week, reduce their risk of stroke by a third compared with less active women.

Cholesterol:

Regular physical activity has been shown to raise levels of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol. This is good cholesterol because it may actually help to protect against cardiovascular disease (coronary heart disease, stroke and peripheral vascular disease).

High blood pressure:

Regular physical activity can help to lower your blood pressure levels if you have high blood pressure. It can also help to prevent high blood pressure from developing. High blood pressure is one of the risk factors for heart disease and stroke.

Diabetes:

If you are regularly physically active then you have a lower risk of developing type 2 diabetes than inactive people. Also, if you already have type 2 diabetes, regular physical activity can help improve the control of your diabetes.

Weight control:

Physical activity helps you to burn off excess fat. Regular physical activity combined with a healthy diet is the best way of losing weight, and keeping that weight off.

Bone and joint problems:

Regular weight-bearing physical activity can also help to prevent osteoporosis (thinning of the bones). The pulling and

tugging on your bones by your muscles during exercise stimulates bone-making cells, which strengthens your bones. If your bones are stronger, you have a reduced risk of breaking your bones when you are older.

Cancer:

Regular physical activity can help to reduce your chance of developing cancer. It roughly halves your chance of developing cancer of the colon (bowel cancer). Breast cancer is also less common in women who are regularly physically active.

Mental health:

Physical activity is thought to help ease stress, boost your energy levels and improve your general well-being and self-esteem. It can also help to reduce anger, it can make you sleep better and may help to prevent some types of dementia.

Keeping you mobile and more able to live by yourself:

Regular physical activity throughout life can help to keep you more mobile as you get older. Still being mobile is one of the things that helps older people remain independent and able to live by themselves at home.

Smoking cessation:

Increasing physical activity levels has been shown to help people trying to quit smoking. It can help to reduce your desire to smoke and can also help with withdrawal symptoms.

However, sometimes problems can occur with physical activity:

- Injury is possible. You can cut down your risk of injury by warming up before any activity, and by wearing the correct footwear.
- Endurance sports such as marathon running can sometimes cause stress fractures in bones. Prolonged endurance exercising can mean that some women stop having their monthly periods.
- In rare cases, sudden death can occur in people who are doing some physical activity. However, most of the time, there is usually an underlying heart problem (which may not have been previously diagnosed) and it is the excess stress that is placed on the person's body during exercise that causes the sudden death. It should be stressed that, in general, regular exercise protects the heart.

So, to combat this:

- If you are not used to physical activity, it is best gradually to build up the level of activity. Start with 10 minutes and over time build this up to 30 minutes. Brisk walking is a great activity to start with.
- One big obstacle is the uphill battle to become fit. Many people feel that the first few attempts at physical activity are quite a struggle. Do not get disheartened. You are likely to find that each time it becomes easier and more enjoyable.
- Try to keep physical activity high on your list of priorities. If one kind of activity becomes boring, try switching to another type. A variety of different activities may be better. Physical activity needs to be something that you enjoy or it will not be something that you will keep up.
- Use everyday activities as part of your physical activity programme. Consider a brisk walk to work or to the shops instead of using a car or bus; take the stairs in the office or shopping and not the lift, etc. Reduce the amount of time that you spend being inactive (watching TV, sitting in front of a computer screen).
- Remember to include some muscle-strengthening exercises.

REFERENCE

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