



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Physical Activity

Q: How can physical activity improve my health?

A: An active lifestyle can help every woman. Being physically active may:

- Lower your risk of getting heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, breast and colon cancer, type 2 diabetes (the most common form of diabetes), osteoarthritis (the most common form of arthritis), and osteoporosis (a disease that weakens bones)
- Lower high blood pressure in people who already have high blood pressure
- Reduce the risk of a second heart attack in people who have already had one heart attack
- Help control joint pain and stiffness from arthritis
- Reduce feelings of mild to moderate anxiety and depression
- Improve your mood
- Increase feelings of well-being
- Help you handle stress
- Help control your weight
- Help you quit smoking
- Increase your energy and endurance
- Help you sleep better

- Reduce falls among older adults
- Reduce the risk of mental decline among older adults

Physical activity can also help you lose weight. If you are overweight or obese, losing weight can lower your risk for many diseases. Being overweight or obese increases your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, type 2 diabetes, breathing problems, osteoarthritis, gallbladder disease, sleep apnea (breathing problems while sleeping), and some cancers.

You can get an idea of whether you are obese, overweight, or of normal weight by figuring out your body mass index (BMI). BMI is a number calculated from your weight and height. Women with a BMI of 25 to 29.9 are considered overweight. Women with a BMI of 30 or more are considered obese. All adults (aged 18 years or older) with a BMI of 25 or higher are considered at risk for premature death and disability. These health risks increase as your BMI rises. Your doctor or nurse can help you figure out your BMI, or you can use the online calculator at www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm.

Not only is how much fat you have important to your health, but it also matters where you carry the fat on your body. Women with a “pear” shape tend to store fat in their hips and buttocks. Women with an “apple” shape tend to store fat around their waists. Women with an “apple” shape are more likely to develop health problems related to being overweight or obese than women with a “pear” shape. For women, a waist size of more 35 inches increases heart disease risk.



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Q: How much physical activity should I do?

A: To reduce the risk of serious, long-term diseases, adults should engage in at least:

- Moderate-intensity physical activity for 30 minutes on 5 or more days of the week, OR
- Vigorous-intensity physical activity for 20 minutes on 3 or more days of the week

This physical activity should be in addition to your routine activities of daily living, such as cooking or spending a few minutes walking from the parking lot to your office.

During moderate-intensity activities you should notice an increase in your heart rate, but you should still be able to talk comfortably. An example of a moderate-intensity activity is walking on a level surface at a brisk pace (about 3 to 4 miles per hour). Other examples include ballroom dancing, leisurely bicycling, moderate housework, and waiting tables.

If your heart rate increases a lot and you are breathing so hard that it is difficult to carry on a conversation, you are probably doing vigorous-intensity activity. Examples of vigorous-intensity activities include jogging, bicycling fast or uphill, singles tennis, and pushing a hand mower.

To lose weight or to maintain a healthy weight after losing weight, you will probably have to be more physically active than you would to lower your risk of disease:

- To lose 5 percent or more of your weight, aim to do 45 to 70 minutes per day of moderate-intensity activ-

ity, or do 22 minutes per day of vigorous-intensity activity.

- To maintain a healthy weight after you have lost weight, aim to do 50 to 80 minutes per day of moderate-intensity activity, or do 25 minutes per day of vigorous-intensity activity.

These guidelines for weight loss and weight maintenance assume that you have not changed the number of calories that you eat each day. If you eat fewer calories each day, you can lose weight and maintain a healthy weight with less time spent being physically active.

Q: Does the type of physical activity I choose matter?

A: Yes! Engaging in different types of physical activity is important to overall physical fitness. Your fitness routine should include:

- Aerobic activities
- Strength-training activities
- Stretching activities

In aerobic activities, you move large muscles in your arms, legs, and hips over and over again. Examples include walking, jogging, bicycling, swimming, and tennis.

Strength-training activities increase the strength and endurance of your muscles. Examples of strength-training activities include working out with weight machines, free weights, and resistance bands. (A resistance band looks like a giant rubber band. You can buy one at a sporting goods store.) Push-ups and sit-ups are examples of strength-training activities you can do



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

without any equipment. You also can use soup cans to work out your arms.

Aim to do strength-training activities twice a week. In each strength-training session, you should do 8 to 10 different activities using the different muscle groups throughout your body, such as the muscles in your abdomen, chest, arms, and legs. Repeat each activity 8 to 12 times, using a weight or resistance that will make you feel tired. When you do strength-training activities, slowly increase the amount of weight or resistance that you use. Also, allow one day in between sessions to avoid excess strain on your muscles and joints.

Stretching activities improve flexibility, allowing more freedom of movement. Moving more freely will make it easier for you to reach down to tie your shoes or look over your shoulder when you back the car out of your driveway. You should do stretching activities after your muscles are warmed up—for example, after strength training. Stretching your muscles before they are warmed up may cause injury.

Q: How can I prevent injuries when I work out?

A: Being physically active is safe if you take precautions. Take these steps to prevent injury:

- If you're not active at all or have a health problem, start your program with short sessions (5 to 10 minutes) of physical activity and build up to your goal. (Be sure to ask a doctor before you start if you have a health problem.)
- Use safety equipment. For example, wear a helmet for bike riding or

supportive shoes for walking or jogging.

- Start every workout with a warm-up. For instance, if you plan to walk at a brisk pace, start by walking at an easy pace for 5 to 10 minutes. When you're done working out, do the same thing until your heart rate returns to normal.
- Drink plenty of fluids when you are physically active, even if you are not thirsty.
- Use sunscreen when you are outside.
- Always bend forward from the hips, not the waist. If you keep your back straight, you're probably bending the right way. If your back "humps," that's probably wrong.
- Stop being active if you feel very out of breath, dizzy, nauseous, or have pain. If you feel tightness or pain in your chest, or you feel faint or have trouble breathing, stop the activity right away and talk to your doctor.

Exercise should not hurt or make you feel really tired. You might feel some soreness, a little discomfort, or a bit weary. But you should not feel pain. In fact, in many ways, being active will probably make you feel better.

Q: I am a larger woman. Can I be physically active?

A: Yes! You may face special challenges in trying to be physically active, but you can work hard to overcome them. You may not be able to bend or move in the same way that other people can. It may be hard to find clothes and equipment for physical activity. You also may feel self-conscious being active around



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

other people. But you can get past these hurdles. Keep trying different ways to make physical activity a part of your life. It is important to your health!

Activities such as swimming or exercising while seated put less stress on your joints because your legs are not supporting the weight of your body. If your feet or joints hurt when you stand, nonweight-bearing activities may be best for you. Ask your doctor for help in coming up with a physical activity plan that's right for you.

Remember that physical activity does not have to be hard or boring to be good for you. Anything that gets you moving around—even for only a few minutes a day—is a healthy start to getting more fit. Over time, you will be able to work out longer and vary the types of activity you can do.

If you commit to being physically active on a regular basis, your body will thank you because it can make a big difference to your health. Even if you do not lose weight, you will still lower your risk of getting many diseases by being physically active. And if you do lose weight, you'll get even more health benefits!

Q: Can I stay active if I have a disability?

A: A disability may make it harder to stay active, but it shouldn't stop you. In most cases, people with disabilities can improve their flexibility, mobility, and coordination by becoming physically active. Getting regular physical activity can also help you stay independent by preventing illnesses, such as heart disease, that can make caring for yourself more difficult.

Even though you have a disability, you should still aim to meet the physical activity goals listed in How much physical activity should I do? Work with a doctor to develop a physical activity plan that works for you.

Q: What are some tips to help me get moving?

A: Fit it into a busy schedule

- If you can't set aside one block of time, do short activities throughout the day, such as three 10-minute walks.
- Create opportunities for activity. Try parking your car farther away from where you are headed. If you ride the bus or train, get off one or two stops early and walk.
- Walk or bike to work or to the store.
- Use stairs instead of the elevator or escalator.
- Take breaks at work to stretch or take quick walks, or do something active with coworkers at lunch.
- Walk while you talk, if you're using a cell phone or cordless phone.
- Doing yard work or household chores counts as physical activity. Turn on some upbeat music to help you do chores faster and speed up your heart rate.

Make it fun

- Choose activities that you enjoy.
- Vary your activities, so you don't get bored. For instance, use different jogging, walking, or biking paths. Or bike one day, and jog the next.



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

- Reward yourself when you achieve your weekly goals. For instance, reward yourself by going to a movie.
- If you have children, make time to play with them outside. Set a good example!
- Plan active vacations that will keep you moving, such as taking tours and site-seeing on foot.
- Do you enjoy watching television? Get up to change the channel and walk around during commercials.

Make it social

- Join a hiking or running club.
- Go dancing with your partner or friends.
- Turn activities into social occasions—for example, go to a movie after you and a friend work out.

Overcome challenges

- Don't let cold weather keep you on the couch. You can find activities to do in the winter, such as indoor fitness classes or exercising to a workout video.
- If you live in a neighborhood where it is unsafe to be active outdoors, contact your local recreational center or church to see if they have indoor activity programs that you can join. You can also find ways to be active at home. For instance, you can do

push-ups or lift hand weights. If you don't have hand weights, you can use canned foods or bottles filled with water or sand.

Don't expect to notice body changes right away. It can take weeks or months before you notice some of the changes from being physically active, such as weight loss. And keep in mind, many benefits of physical activity are happening inside you and you cannot see them.

Q: Do I need to talk to my doctor before I start?

A: You should talk to your doctor before you begin any physical activity program if you:

- Have heart disease, had a stroke, or are at high risk for these diseases
- Have diabetes or are at high risk for diabetes
- Are obese (BMI of 30 or greater)
- Have an injury or disability
- Are older than age 50 and have not been active for some time
- Are pregnant
- Have a bleeding or detached retina, eye surgery, or laser treatment on your eye
- Have had recent hip surgery ■



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

For more information...

For more information on physical activity, please call womenshealth.gov at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity, NCCDPHP, CDC

Phone: (770) 488-6042

Internet Address:

<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/>

Food and Nutrition Information Center, NAL, USDA

Phone: (301) 504-5414

Internet Address:

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/>

HealthierUS.gov

Phone: (301) 565-4167

Internet Address:

<http://www.healthierus.gov/exercise.html>

Weight Control Information Network, NIDDK, NIH, HHS

Phone: (877) 946-4627

Internet Address:

<http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/win.htm>

The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

Phone: (202) 690-9000

Internet Address: <http://www.fitness.gov/>

American Council on Exercise

Phone: (888) 825-3636

Internet Address:

<http://www.acefitness.org/>

America On the Move

Phone: (800) 807-0077

Internet Address:

<http://aom.americaonthemove.org/>

All material contained in the FAQs is free of copyright restrictions, and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services. Citation of the source is appreciated.

Content last updated July 2008.