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## Physical activity to last a lifetime

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Congratulations on your plan to lead a healthier lifestyle! Here is an overview of the latest recommendations on physical activities and exercise from leaders in the health field, designed to help you attain good habits that will last throughout your life.

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### Guidelines on good health

Health experts recommend that adults of all fitness levels engage in physical activity of moderate intensity, for at least 30 minutes on most, and preferably every day of the week for cardiovascular benefits. *Resistance* (strength) training two to three times a week (using machines, bands or free weights) and a regular stretching routine are also recommended. An hour a day of physical activity is necessary for most people to prevent weight gain over time as we age, and 60 to 90 minutes of daily physical activity is generally necessary to lose weight and to maintain weight loss after a weight loss program. Children and teens should participate in at least an hour per day of moderate to vigorous physical activities.

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### What is the proper amount of exercise?

Exercise needn't be done all at once. In fact, by breaking your exercise routines into three 10 to 15-minute sessions each day, you can minimize the risk of injury if you're just getting started. What's more, you'll achieve the same health benefit from several short sessions as you would from exercising in a single, longer session. You can actually accumulate your activities throughout the day! Even people who dislike vigorous exercise or who may have become discouraged by trying to adhere to a strict exercise regimen can achieve health benefits by gradually becoming more physically active.

By concentrating more on the amount, rather than the intensity of effort, you may find it easier to come up with creative ways of incorporating these activities into your daily life. Variations could include mowing the lawn for 30 minutes, playing volleyball for 45 minutes, or taking a brisk 30-minute walk or swim. Even greater benefits can be achieved if you exercise for 60 minutes several days per week. You should strive for at least one exercise session of at least 30 minutes of continuous activity per week in order to build endurance and make your heart and lungs stronger (to increase your cardiovascular

fitness). Longer exercise sessions also seem to be best for burning fat and for weight loss and have greater mood-elevating and stress-relieving effects.

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## Getting started

Getting started should be a gradual process for everyone, especially those who live sedentary lifestyles. The most common cause of injury is exercising too aggressively, too soon. Instead, start out gradually and slowly increase the time and intensity of your physical activities or your regular exercise program. Give your muscles and joints time to adjust to the new you and select activities you can live with for a lifetime! Remember that moderation and consistency are the keys to success.

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## Which exercises should you choose?

The key to discovering the physical activity right for you is to choose one or more that you will be able to enjoy on a regular basis for months and years to come. Here are some questions that can help you assess what's best for you:

- How physically fit are you?
  - What benefits do you hope to gain from exercising?
  - Do you like to exercise alone or with other people?
  - Do you prefer to exercise outdoors or in your home?
  - How much money are you willing to spend for sports equipment or facilities?
  - When can you best fit the activity into your schedule?
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## Types of exercise

1. *Stretching exercise:* Stretching is suggested after exercising to help you stay flexible and prevent stiffness. It's important to warm up before stretching to avoid injury, and to stretch slowly—to the point of a little discomfort, then holding that position for 20 to 30 seconds. Finish your exercise sessions with about 10 minutes of stretching using each major muscle group—arms, legs, shoulders, etc., and remember—don't bounce!
2. *Aerobic exercise:* The American College of Sports Medicine defines aerobic exercise as "any activity that uses large muscle groups, can be maintained continuously, and is rhythmic in nature." Activities such as brisk walking, biking, swimming, dancing, stair-climbing or working in the garden are examples. These activities should elevate your heart rate for a given period of time (10 to 20 minutes per session, for example). To lose weight and keep it off, do longer sessions (60 to 90 minutes). It's important to note that even a moderate increase in daily activities can significantly improve the health and quality of life for most people. Start by parking farther away from the store when you shop, walking up escalators, and taking a short walk at work during your lunch break.
3. *Strengthening exercise:* A moderate amount of resistance training—push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, or working with light weights, elastic bands or weight machines, will help you strengthen your

muscles and increase bone mass (which helps prevent osteoporosis). Strengthening abdominal and back muscles decreases the chances of injuring your back, and strong muscles around knee joints can help protect them from injury. Adults should perform these activities for 20 to 25 minutes two or three times a week, in addition to your regular physical activity, to improve strength and endurance.

For those who wish to achieve an even greater health benefit, and for people who already active, a regularly sustained regimen of more vigorous activity or activities of longer duration may provide the answer (such as a long hike or long bike ride up and down hills). Add these to your regular routine, if desired, making certain that you are ready both physically and mentally for the additional challenge. Strenuous workouts might include rowing, jogging, jumping rope, soccer, lap swimming, cross-country skiing, or stationary cycling.

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## **Warm up and cool down**

Always warm up before and after stretching or exercise, since overworking cold muscles can injure them. You can warm up by doing your regular activity at an easy pace for five to 10 minutes.

Cool down by slowing your workout gradually, then exercising at a relaxed pace for at least five minutes. Never stand still immediately after vigorous exercise, which can make you feel dizzy and may increase the risk of irregular heartbeats. In cold weather, warm up and cool down indoors.

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## **Replace fluids**

The fluids you lose through sweating need to be replaced—especially in hot or humid weather when you can lose more than a quart of water in an hour while exercising. To stay hydrated drink water or diluted fruit juice before, during and after exercise, even if you aren't thirsty. (Sports drinks are nutritionally similar to diluted juice, but are more expensive and are not necessary for most people.). Avoid caffeinated beverages because they can have a dehydrating effect.

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## **Wear the right shoes**

Your athletic shoes should provide cushioning, heel support, ankle support and stability. Different athletic shoes are designed for specific activities, such as running, aerobics and walking. Cross-training shoes combine characteristics of many types of athletic shoes and can be used for multiple activities. Replace your shoes at least once a year or sooner if they seem to be losing their support and cushioning effects or if the soles look worn down.

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## **Consulting your doctor**

A gradual, sensible exercise program usually has minimal health risks. On the other hand, some people should seek medical advice. If you are planning a vigorous exercise program, are not already exercising and you have one of the following conditions, you should talk to your doctor first:

- Age: 50 years or older for women and 40 years or older for men
- A history of heart or lung disease
- Lung, heart or muscle/joint conditions
- Obesity or being overweight (having a body mass index ( BMI) equal to or greater than 25)
- Tobacco use
- High blood pressure (*hypertension*)
- A family history of heart disease (involving close relatives)
- Diabetes
- High LDL cholesterol or low HDL cholesterol (less than 40 mg/dL)
- Muscle or joint problems
- Breathlessness with mild exertion
- Medical conditions requiring a specialized exercise program, such as arthritis or pregnancy

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## Final note

If you haven't checked any of these symptoms, you can go ahead and get started on a gradual, sensible exercise program that's tailored to your needs and interests. Making regular exercise a part of your daily routine is one of the best things you can do for yourself, especially as you get older.