Why is Physical Activity Important?

We are constantly seeing magazine advertisements and television commercials telling us to buy the latest exercise equipment or try the latest exercise routine, but do you know why it is important for you to exercise and be physically active? There are many physical and mental benefits from moderate physical activity.

The *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* recommends that most individuals partake in 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity or a combination of the two every week.

Moderate and vigorous intensity activities are relative terms; the level of intensity is based on the individual and his or her fitness level. Moderate intensity activity is any activity that causes a noticeable increase in breathing and heart rate, but allows the individual to comfortably hold a conversation. Vigorous intensity activity is any activity that causes more rapid breathing and heart rate, but still allows the individual to hold a conversation using only short sentences.

Individuals should also perform muscle-strengthening activities on two or more days a week. Muscle-strengthening activities are activities that work the muscle repetitively. Individuals should do an activity 8 to 12 times in a row, take a break, and repeat this 1 to 2 more times. Examples of these activities are:

- lifting weights
- using resistance bands
- doing exercises that use your body weight for resistance, such as push-ups and sit-ups
- heavy gardening, such as digging and shoveling
- yoga

Here are just some of the many health benefits of regular physical activity:

- up to 35% lower risk of coronary heart disease and stroke
- up to 50% lower risk of type 2 diabetes
- up to 50% lower risk of colon cancer
- up to 20% lower risk of breast cancer
- 30% lower risk of early death
- up to 83% lower risk of osteoarthritis
- up to 68% lower risk of hip fracture
- up to 30% lower risk of falls—older adults
- up to 30% lower risk of depression
- up to 30% lower risk of dementia
- Helps with managing weight
- Improves heart, lung and muscle fitness

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- Increases overall mood
- Improves sleep quality

Before beginning any physical activity, especially if you have been inactive for a while or have medical conditions that may make it unsafe to exercise, talk to your doctor. It is important to start out a physical activity routine slowly to prevent injury. As your physical fitness improves, you can begin to increase your time spent doing physical activity, distance, speed, or number of days per week to keep your intensity up.

Keep in mind, some activity is better than none, even if you don’t have time to meet the Physical Activity Guidelines. Also, breaking up your “sit time” throughout the day is important. Long periods of inactivity can be harmful to your health even if you do perform regular physical activity.

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