

Physical activity

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This factsheet is for people who would like information about the health benefits of physical activity.

Keeping physically active can prevent major illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and colon cancer. Despite this, about two in three men and three in four women do less than 30 minutes moderate intensity activity on at least five days a week.

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Why exercise?

Physical activity can prevent many major illnesses. Evidence shows that regular exercise can:

- promote healthy blood sugar levels to prevent or control diabetes
- promote bone density to protect against osteoporosis
- reduce the overall risk of cancer
- increase levels of HDL or "good" cholesterol -reducing the risk of developing heart disease
- lower high blood pressure-reducing the risk of developing heart disease
- boost the immune system
- boost self-confidence and help prevent depression
- in combination with a balanced diet, help to maintain a healthy weight

Barriers to being more active

You may find the threat of a future illness is not enough motivation to change your habits now. There can be many reasons for not taking up exercise, including:

- lack of time due to work or family commitments
- cost of equipment or gym membership
- lack of facilities nearby
- personal safety when exercising outdoors alone
- poor weather or night-time lighting

However there are ways to overcome all of these potential barriers and work exercise into your daily life. This could include getting off the bus to work one or two stops earlier than usual.

What types of activity count?

Many people believe that only vigorous exercise or playing sport counts as healthy activity. Yet substantial health benefits can be achieved from regular activity without the need for special equipment, sporting ability or getting very hot and sweaty.

When you do moderate intensity activity, your breathing and heart rate will increase and you will feel warm. You should still be able to talk without panting in between your words.

Moderate intensity physical activity, such as brisk walking, painting, hovering and mowing the lawn, all count and are enough to benefit health and prevent illness in adults.

It's possible to achieve your 30 minutes at least five times a week target by making fairly simple changes to your everyday routine - without joining the gym or running a marathon.

Examples of everyday activities that count include:

- walking up stairs instead of using lifts
- walking up moving escalators
- walking instead of driving for short journeys
- doing the housework at double-time
- DIY and gardening

How much physical activity should I do?

For an adult weighing 60kg (132lbs), regular, moderate intensity physical activity means using up about an extra 100 calories (kcal) per day, most days of the week. This is about 30 minutes of activity, such as a 1.5 mile (2km) brisk walk.

If you have previously been inactive, separate sessions of 10 or 15 minutes also count and can help you reach the 30 minute amount.

Children and young people need to do 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity every day. This needs to include at least two weekly activities that produce high physical stress on bones, such as dancing, jumping or aerobics to aid development.

Getting motivated

Keeping fit

Your ability to keep up a physical activity, such as jogging, racket sports, cycling or swimming, is related to your aerobic fitness or stamina.

Generally speaking, the greater your stamina, the greater are the health benefits. If you want to improve your stamina, it's important to start gently, increasing the frequency of your activity before increasing how hard you exercise.

Have fun

There are many activities you could take part in to increase your stamina. Not everyone sees exercise as fun, and doing something you find boring, just because it's good for you is very difficult to sustain. But you can take steps to make it more enjoyable.

- Try out different sports or activities until you find something you like, such as a dance or aerobics class.
- Join a team or club where you could meet new friends. This could be a local football team, or a sport you may not have tried before (like korfbal).

- Activities that you can do as a family or with friends may help with motivation. When you find an activity you like, exercise at a pace that still allows you to talk.
- Try to go somewhere different and exercise outside such as a forest, a beach or a park.
- Make sure you vary your activity a little so you don't get bored.

Achieving your goals

Even when you usually enjoy exercising, there will be days when you just can't seem to find the motivation to get active. Here are some practical tips to help keep up your enthusiasm.

- Keep a diary that highlights the sport or activity you do. Note down how far you ran or the match score, your pulse, how you felt, etc. That way you can look back and see how you have improved over time.
- Collect inspiration and stick quotes from coaches, athletes or anyone successful around your house and/or your office. Inspirational stories from people who have achieved against the odds may help - if they can do it, so can you.
- Set yourself some short and long-term goals. Success will provide you with a sense of satisfaction and further motivation to keep up the new lifestyle. Keep your goals: specific; measurable; achievable; realistic; time-based (SMART). For example, rather than saying you'll get fit by summer, start by setting the more specific goal of going to a one hour step aerobics class or an ashtanga yoga class each week.

Staying motivated

When it comes to staying motivated it's just as important to train your brain as it is to train your body. Here are just a few ideas to help you.

- A great way to stay focused is to keep reminding yourself of the reasons you started exercising in the first place. This may include losing excess weight, improving your health or testing yourself in a competition or race.
- Picture yourself achieving your goal, such as completing a race or fitting into smaller trousers - and imagine what it will feel like. Through visualisation these images and feelings will motivate you and will help you achieve them for real.
- Exercising releases chemicals in the brain, like serotonin, that have a strong affect on your mood, helping reduce anxiety, stress and depression. So whenever you don't feel like exercising, try to remind yourself how good you'll feel afterwards.

Further information

- British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity and Health (HFNC)
www.bhfactive.org.uk

Sources

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Related topics

- [Bowel cancer](#)
- [Depression](#)
- [Diabetes \(type 1\)](#)
- [Diabetes \(type 2\)](#)
- [Healthy weight for adults](#)
- [High cholesterol](#)
- [Looking after your heart](#)
- [Osteoporosis](#)

This information was published by BUPA's health information team and is based on reputable sources of medical evidence. It has been peer reviewed by Dr James Quekett, Bsc.MB Ch.B MRCGP DRCOG DFFP, partner/principal general practitioner at Rowcroft Medical Centre, and by BUPA doctors. The content is intended for general information only and does not replace the need for personal advice from a qualified health professional.

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