

Physical Activity

The human body is made to be physically active and physical activity is a vital aspect of health. People who lead active lifestyles are less likely to die early, or to experience major illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and colon cancer.

But it's often difficult to change exercise habits. Thinking about your motivation can help.

Exercise facts

Evidence shows that regular exercise can:

- increase levels of HDL or "good" cholesterol,
- lower high blood pressure,
- help improve body composition by burning fat,
- promote healthy blood sugar levels,
- promote bone density,
- boost the immune system,
- improve mood and reduce the chance of depression.

Despite the strong case for staying active, many people find it difficult to adapt their daily lives to incorporate physical activity. With cars on most driveways and the decline in the number of physically active jobs, 70% of the adult population is sufficiently inactive to be classed as "sedentary". Being sedentary increases the risk of a heart attack or stroke by the same amount as smoking.

In practice, it seems that the threat of a future illness is often not enough motivation for people to change their habits.

Barriers to being more active

People give many reasons for not taking up exercise:

- 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 get round all of these potential barriers. For example, by getting off the bus to school or work one or two stops earlier than usual, which is free and requires no special equipment or facilities.

The moderate message

Many people are put off physical activity because they believe that only vigorous exercise or playing sport counts as healthy activity. But, in fact, substantial health benefits can be achieved from regular activity without the need for special equipment, sporting ability or getting very hot and sweaty.

There is now strong scientific evidence that moderate intensity physical activity – equivalent to brisk walking for 30 minutes per day on most days of the week – is enough to bring about real benefits in terms of promoting health and preventing illnesses.

Regular activity can also improve the way you look and feel. In combination with a balanced diet, regular activity can help to maintain a healthy weight. It can even boost self-confidence and reduce the risk of depression.

How much is enough?

For an adult, regular, moderate intensity physical activity means using up about an extra 200 calories per day, most days of the week. This equates to about 30 minutes of activity, such as a two-mile brisk walk, that should make you feel warm and mildly out of breath. During moderate intensity activity, you should still be able to talk without panting in between your words.

If you have previously been inactive and 30 minutes of activity per day sounds like a tall order, the good news is that separate sessions of ten minutes can count towards the total.

It's possible to achieve your 30 minute target by making fairly simple changes to your everyday routine, without joining the gym or running a marathon.

Examples of everyday activities that count:

- walking up stairs instead of using lifts,
- walking up moving escalators,
- for short journeys, walking instead of driving,
- doing the housework at "double-time",
- DIY and gardening, such as painting or raking leaves.

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

The key to keeping up with a resolution to get fit is finding an activity, or range of activities, that you enjoy. 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 new sports or activities until you find something you like. When you find an activity you like, try exercising with a friend, at a pace that still allows you to talk. Activities that you can do as a family or with friends may help with motivation.

Perhaps try activities to music, such as dance or aerobics, and make sure you vary your activity a little so you don't get bored. Try exercising in beautiful scenery, such as on a beach or in a park. Maybe you could buy yourself some new exercise clothes that you like wearing and feel good in.

Staying motivated

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 enthusiasm:

- Keep a diary. Whatever sport or activity you do, this can help you. 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. 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.

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 win the mental battle and stay on the exercise track.

- 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 SMART:
Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Realistic
Time-based
For example, rather than saying you'll get fit by summer, start by setting the more specific goal of going to an hour-long fitness class every week.
- A great way to stay focused is to keep reminding yourself of the reasons that motivated you to start exercising in the first place eg the aim of losing weight, improving your health, or testing yourself in a competition by taking part in a race.
- Visualisation. Picture yourself achieving your goal, such as completing a race or slipping into the next size down in trousers, and imagine what it will feel like. These images and feelings will help to motivate you to achieving them for real.
- Enjoy it! Exercising releases chemicals in the brain, such as 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.