

Starting an Exercise Program

The toughest and most important step in your exercise program is getting started. Often people think they need to tackle a strenuous program right away to prove they are committed. But in reality, slow and steady is the best way to begin.

You need a workable plan to change your lifestyle from sedentary to physically active. Following some basic guidelines can help establish an exercise program that protects you against disease and disability and insures a healthy, independent and productive life.

Prepare for success

- Choose a fun exercise activity that can be practiced comfortably year round. Many people choose walking, bicycling, jogging, swimming, rowing or exercising with fitness videos.
- If you have an existing health problem, contact your physician before beginning any vigorous physical activity. Sometimes, restrictions might have to be placed on the level of your participation.
- Join a class for camaraderie, support.
- Early morning exercisers are more regular than evening exercisers as they have less conflicts.
- Increase the time that you exercise by no more than 10% a week.

Start slowly

- Your goal is to set an exercise habit you enjoy. Make sure your first activity sessions are fun and not tiring. Give your body a chance to get used to it.
- Give yourself plenty of time to warm up and cool down with walking, bending and gentle stretching exercises (e.g. at least 5-10 minutes each for warming up and cooling down). Doing flexibility exercises will help you avoid injuries.

Establish a reasonable schedule

- Set a weekly exercise schedule that includes days off. For example, start exercising every other day, with three days off each week. Later, increase the number of days to 5-6 times a week.
- Start with a program of moderate physical activity of no more than 30 minutes a day. Keep it interesting with a balanced program of different activities such as walking, bicycle riding, or swimming. Alternate between high and low impact activities. e.g. aerobics or walking on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and biking or swimming on Tuesday, Thursday.
- If 30 minutes of activity is too difficult or you don't have enough time, break it up into shorter intervals. For instance, walk for 15 minutes in the morning and work in the garden for 15 minutes later. Gradually work up to 60 minutes a day, 5-6 days a week.

- Don't stop exercising if you get muscle soreness in the beginning. It will disappear as you exercise regularly. Stop exercising if you experience severe chest pain or shortness of breath.. Consult your physician.
- Choose a comfortable time of day to exercise, not too soon after eating or when the air temperature is too warm.
- Wear shoes that are comfortable, provide good support and don't cause blisters or calluses. The shoes should have arch supports and should elevate the heel one-half to three-quarters of an inch above the sole. When choosing a shoe, select one with uppers made of materials that "breathe", such as leather or nylon mesh.
- Buy appropriate safety equipment. e.g. bike helmets, wrist guards for skating.

Stick with it

- Focus on working toward your goals gradually. Consider tracking your progress with a simple chart, perhaps listing the number of minutes you exercise each day.
- Don't stop your fitness program; the benefits begin to diminish in two weeks and disappear in two to eight months.
- Congratulate yourself for each accomplishment. Your progress will develop into a pattern through which you work up to higher levels of exertion over time.

Sleep

- Go to bed early. Get 7-8 hours of sleep.
- Try to exercise at least 2 hours before retiring to bed.

Weight

- Weigh yourself no more than once a week, first thing in the morning upon awakening. One pound of fat has 3500 calories of energy stored up. One-half to one pound a week loss is healthy.
- Measure your body fat at the start of your program and 6 months later for encouragement.

Portion size

- Read food labels and measure out one serving per meal. You will be surprised how small it is. If you are still hungry eat high fiber vegetables and whole grains.

Appearance

- Don't let your appearance keep you from exercising. Others will encourage your effort at improving your health.
- DO NOT BE EMBARRASSED ABOUT WHERE YOU ARE STARTING. BE DETERMINED ABOUT WHERE YOU ARE GOING.