

If you're considering putting an exercise program together it's perfectly normal to have a lot of questions swimming around in your head. What's the best activity to participate in? How do I get the most out of exercising? How long should I exercise?

Often, the hardest part of getting in shape is taking the first step. Here are some simple steps to help you begin your journey.

Think F.I.T

To make physical improvements, you need to work your body harder than usual. This is referred to as the overload principle. As your body becomes more conditioned, you need to increase the frequency, intensity, or time of your workouts in order to continue improving your fitness level.

Frequency: How often you exercise. For beginners, consider starting with 2-3 sessions per week.

Intensity: How hard you exercise. For example, the pace you walk or run, the amount of weight you lift, or your heart rate count.

Time: How long you perform an activity. "Time" can also refer to the number of sets or repetitions you perform in weight training

Exercise Component 1: Aerobic Exercise

Aerobic exercise increases the health and function of your heart, lung, and circulatory system. For maximum effectiveness, aerobic exercise needs to be rhythmic, continuous and involve the large muscle groups (primarily located in the lower part of your body.) Walking, jogging, cycling, aerobic dance, and stair climbing are examples of activities that use large muscle groups. Activities combining upper and lower body movements such as cross-country skiing, rowing, and swimming can lead to even higher levels of aerobic capacity.

Exercise Component 2: Strength Training

Strength training is the process of exercising with progressively heavier resistance to build or retain muscle. Unless you perform regular strength exercise, you will lose up to one-half pound of muscle every year of life after age 25. muscle is very active tissue with high energy requirements, even when you are asleep, your muscle are responsible for over 25% of your calorie use. An increase in muscle tissue causes a corresponding increase in the number of calories your body will burn, even at rest.

Exercise component 3: Flexibility

Flexibility is a critical element of an exercise program but it is often overlooked. Stretching is important for number of reasons; increases physical performance, decreases risk of injury, increases blood supply and nutrients to the joints, increases neuromuscular coordination, reduces soreness, improves balance, decreases risk of low back pain, and reduces stress in muscles.

Choosing an Exercise

The best exercise is an activity that you enjoy enough to pursue enthusiastically. Experiment with different forms of activity (cross training). Alternating new activities with old favorites will keep your enthusiasm high. Cross training also helps avoid injury due to repeatedly doing the same activity. Here are some suggestions:

Indoor (facility) activities: If the treadmill, stair master, rowing machine or stationary cycle doesn't excite you, sample some group activities that strike your fancy. Participate in a group cycling class, beat stress with yoga, find balance with martial arts, stay cool with indoor swimming, or kick some you know what with boxaerobics.

At home activities: You don't need to join a gym to experience a variety of activities. Your local video store or library will carry a variety of fitness videos that allow you to workout in the privacy of your own home. Some equipment may be required, depending on the activity you select. A few inexpensive pieces of equipment include a jump rope, a set of hand weights, dyna-bands or tubing, or a basic step (for step aerobics).

If you enjoy working out at home then you want to consider investing in a larger piece of equipment such as a treadmill, ski machine, stationary bicycle or elliptical trainer.

Outdoor activities: Outdoor activities abound during all four seasons. Sample the variety of activities available to you. For example, take a hike to enjoy fall colors, learn to cross country ski when old man winter visits, walk among the flowers in the Spring or dive into swimming during the hot months of Summer. Getting outdoors into the fresh air not only adds variety to your exercise program but it seems to provide an uplifting of one's spirit as well.

Determining your starting point:

To achieve cardiovascular benefits, the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends exercising 3-5 times per week (frequency) with a training heart rate of 60-85 percent of your maximum (intensity) for 20-60 minutes (time).

To attain muscular fitness benefits, the ACSM recommends weight training two days per week (frequency), performing one to three sets of 10 repetitions (time) of eight to ten different exercises at approximately 70-85 percent of your one repetition maximum (intensity).

If you're just beginning an exercise program, start in the low range of the above recommendations. For example, participate in a cardiovascular activity (walking, aerobics, cycling, etc.) for 20 minutes, three times a week and add strength training exercises to your workout, twice a week. Schedule your strength training workouts with 48 hours rest in between to allow your muscles to recuperate and repair after each workout.

Begin Slowly and Gradually Build

Unfamiliarity with movements and equipment can prove frustrating enough that you may consider throwing in the towel. Take heart, it's normal to feel awkward in the beginning, especially if you have undertaken an activity that you aren't familiar with it. After all, even fitness instructors were once beginners!

If you attempt "too much, too soon" it will lead to soreness, fatigue and/or injuries. Work at your own level, start out slow, and gradually increase duration and level of difficulty as your body progresses. Getting fit is not an overnight proposition, it's a lifestyle commitment. Don't expect immediate dramatic changes in your body shape or weight loss. Although changes are happening internally, most external benefits won't become visible for the first four to six weeks. Stay focused on your lifestyle choice and celebrate the internal benefits you're experiencing such as increased energy, less stress and anxiety, higher self-esteem, and an increased feeling of well-being.

Staying Motivated

Only one-third of those who begin an exercise program are still exercising by the end of their first year. The good news is that with some strategizing and planning, you can beat the dropout odds and make a successful transition to a lifestyle that incorporates exercise. Here's some tips to help you stay motivated.

Find a Fitness Partner: Studies show that exercise adherence is generally greater if the family or a friend is included in the commitment to exercise. Find a walking partner., play tennis with you spouse, or go rollerblading with the kids. If you would like an online fitness partner to share motivation and tips with, visit our Find a Fitness Partner bulletin board.

Start an Exercise Log or Journal: An exercise log or journal is an excellent way to chart your progress and provide motivation. Nothing best the feeling of success as you read through your accomplishments. Exercise logs can take on many forms; a calendar to record your workouts, a daily journal to record your feelings and goal, a computerized exercise log, or a log purchased at bookstore. The key is to select a log or journal that fits your needs and provides you the kind information that is meaningful to you.

Schedule your workouts: Exercise must be a priority in order to establish it as a lifestyle practice. Make time for your workouts and schedule them on your daily calendar or planner.

Toss your scale: Ask yourself, “How often has stepping on the scale in the morning ruined my day?” If your answer is “often,” consider whether or not you should give that little machine such power over you. The fact is that exercise should be about making a commitment to your health and well being, weight loss is a natural side effect of that commitment.

Dress the part: Wear comfortable clothes for exercising, they will help you feel like working out. If you exercise at a gym put your exercise wear in a bag and set it beside the door the night before. When it’s time to head out the door, all you have to do is grab the bag on the way out.

Entertain yourself: If you exercise alone, consider wearing a walkman to listen to your favorite music or books on tape to help keep you entertained during the workout. Many pieces of exercise equipment have racks that fit onto the console to hold reading material. If you exercise at home, turn on some music or bring the television within viewing range.

Evaluate your progress: It’s a good idea to test your fitness level when you start and reevaluate yourself every couple of months. There are a variety of fitness tests that you can administer yourself. Getting a body composition test is another great way to chart your progress and can be done every four to six months. The local YMCA or fitness club can perform this test at a minimal cost, even if you’re not a member.

Make exercise non-negotiable: Think of exercise as something you do without question, like brushing your teeth or going to work. Taking the lifestyle perspective will help you make exercise a habit.