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The National Women's Health Information Center

A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



Frequently Asked Questions about Physical Activity (Exercise)

How can physical activity improve my health?

An active lifestyle can help every woman. Being physically active can provide these benefits:

- reduces your risk of dying from heart disease or stroke
- lowers your risk of getting heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, colon cancer, and diabetes
- lowers high blood pressure
- helps keep your bones, muscles, and joints healthy
- reduces anxiety and depression and improves your mood
- helps you handle stress
- helps control your weight
- protects against falling and bone fractures in older adults
- may help protect against breast cancer
- helps control joint swelling and pain from arthritis
- gives you more energy
- helps you sleep better
- helps you look better

Physical activity also is an important part of weight loss treatment. If you are overweight or obese, losing weight can lower your risk for many diseases. A growing number of women are overweight or obese. Being overweight or obese increases your risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, breathing problems, arthritis, gallbladder disease, sleep apnea (breathing problems while sleeping), osteoarthritis, and some cancers. Obesity is measured with a body mass index (BMI). BMI shows the relationship of weight to height. Women with a BMI of 25 to 29.9 are considered overweight, whereas women with a BMI of 30 or more are considered obese. All adults (aged 18 years or older) who have a BMI of 25 or more are considered at risk for premature death and disability from being overweight or obese. These health risks increase as the BMI rises. Your health care provider can help you figure out your body mass, or you can go to www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm.

Not only are health care providers concerned about how much fat a person has, but also where the fat is located on the body. Women with a “pear” shape tend to store fat in their hips and buttocks. Women with an “apple” shape store fat around their waists. For most women, carrying extra weight around their waists or middle (with a waist larger than 35 inches) raises health risks (like heart disease, diabetes, or cancer) more than carrying extra weight around their hips or thighs

How can I prevent injuries when I exercise?

If you're not active at all or have a medical problem, start your program with short sessions (5 to 10 minutes) of physical activity and build up to your goal. Before you start your activity, be sure to warm up for 5 to 10 minutes. Use the right equipment—whether it's walking shoes, running shoes, or knee pads—make sure it's in good condition and right for your skill level. Drink water before, during, and after exercise. At the end of your physical activity, cool down by decreasing the intensity of your activity so your heartbeat is normal. Be sure to stretch. If your chest feels tight or painful, or you feel faint or have trouble breathing at any time, stop the activity right away and talk to your health care provider.

I am a larger woman. Can I be physically active?

Very large people face special challenges trying to be active. You may not be able to bend or move in the same way that other people can. It may be hard to find clothes and equipment for exercising. You may feel self-conscious being active around other people. Facing these challenges is hard, but it can be done! The Weight Control Information Network says that non-weight-bearing activities, like swimming or water workouts, put less stress on your joints because you don't have to lift or push your own weight. If your feet or joints hurt when you stand, non-weight-bearing activities may be best for you. If you can't do an activity, don't be hard on yourself. Be proud of pushing yourself up out of a chair or walking a short distance. Pat yourself on the back for trying even if you can't do it the first time. It may be easier the next time—so try again! Remember to appreciate what you can do, even if you think it's a small amount. Just moving any part of your body—even for a short time—can make you healthier.

Can I stay active if I have a disability?

One of the best things you can do for your health is to find an activity that gets your body moving and stick with it. You may be limited by a disability. This disability may make it harder, but it doesn't need to stop you from staying active. In most cases, people with disabilities can improve their heart, lungs, muscles, and bones—in addition to flexibility, mobility, and coordination—by becoming physically active. Talk to your health care provider about your personal needs.

What are some tips to help me get moving?

- Choose an activity that's fun.
- Change your activities, so you don't get bored.
- Doing housework may not be fun, but it does get you moving! So does gardening, yard work, and walking the dog.
- If you can't set aside one block of time, do short activities during the day, such as three, 10-minute walks.

- Create opportunities for activity, such as parking your car farther away, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, or walking down the hall to talk to a coworker instead of using e-mail.
- Don't let the cold weather keep you on the couch! You can still find activities to do in the winter like exercising to a workout video or joining a sports league. Or get a head start on your spring cleaning by choosing active indoor chores like window washing or reorganizing closets.
- Use different jogging, walking, or biking paths to vary your routine.
- Exercise with a friend or family member.
- If you have children, make time to play with them outside. Set a positive example!
- Make activities into social occasions—have dinner after you and a friend work out.
- Read books or magazines to inspire you.
- Set specific, short-term goals, and reward yourself when you achieve them.
- Don't feel badly if you don't notice body changes right away.
- Make your activity a regular part of your day, so it becomes a habit.
- Build a community group to form walking clubs, build walking trails, start exercise classes, and organize special events to promote physical activity.

Do I need to talk to my health care provider before I start?

Talk to your health care provider before you start any physical activity if you:

- have heart disease or had a stroke or are at high risk for them
- have diabetes or are at high risk for it
- are obese (body mass index of 30 or greater)
- have an injury (like a knee injury)
- are older than age 50
- are pregnant

For more information...

You can also find out more about physical activity by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center at 800-994-9662 or the following organizations:

Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, FCS, FNCS, USDA

Phone: (703) 605-4266

Internet Address: <http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/>

Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity, NCCDPHP, CDC

Phone: (770) 488-5820

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/>

Food and Nutrition Information Center, NAL, USDA

Phone: (301) 504-5414

Internet Address: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/>

Weight Control Information Network, NIDDK, NIH, HHS

Phone: (877) 946-4627

Internet Address: <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/win.htm>

American Council on Exercise

Phone: (800) 825-3636

Internet Address: <http://www.acefitness.org/>

American Obesity Association

Phone: (800) 98-OBESE

Internet Address: <http://www.obesity.org/>

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