

Benefits of Exercise

Get Motivated to Exercise

Need a reason to work out? Here are 7 to start

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WebMD Weight Loss Clinic - Feature

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What if someone told you that a thinner, healthier, and longer life was within your grasp? Sound too good to be true? According to a wealth of research, [exercise](#) is the silver bullet for a better quality of life.

Not only does regular exercise aid in [weight loss](#), it reduces your risk for several chronic diseases and conditions. Finding activities that you enjoy and that become part of your daily routine is the key to a long and healthy life.

The list of health benefits is impressive, and the requirements are relatively simple -- just do it.

Ward Off Disease

Research has confirmed that any amount of exercise, at any age, is beneficial. And, in general, the more you do, the greater the benefits. The National Academy of Sciences has recommended that everyone strive for a total of an hour per day of physical activity. Sounds like a lot, but the hour can be made up of several shorter bursts of activity (it can be walking, gardening, even heavy housecleaning) done throughout the day.

Physical activity is an essential part of any weight-loss program, to maximize your fat loss while keeping valuable muscle mass. But exercise has many other health and longevity benefits. It can help prevent or improve these conditions:

1. Heart Disease. Regular activity strengthens your heart muscle; lowers blood pressure; increases "good" [cholesterol](#) (high-density lipoproteins or HDLs) and lowers "bad"

cholesterol (low-density lipoproteins or LDLs); enhances blood flow; and helps your heart function more efficiently. All of these benefits reduce the risk of [stroke](#), heart disease, and [high blood pressure](#).

Researchers at Duke University suggest that the amount of physical activity, rather than its intensity, has the biggest impact on improving blood lipids (cholesterol). According to *The New England Journal of Medicine*, these researchers also found that any exercise is better than none -- although more is better.

2. Stroke. In an analysis of 23 studies, researchers found that being active reduces your risk of having and dying from a stroke. According to a study published in the journal *Stroke*, moderately active study participants had 20% less risk of stroke than less active participants.

3. Type II Diabetes. This disease is increasing at alarming rates -- by 62% since 1990 -- and 17 million Americans now have it. Physical activity can enhance weight loss and help prevent and/or control this condition. Losing weight can increase insulin sensitivity, improve blood sugar and cholesterol levels, and reduce blood pressure -- all of which are very important to the health of people with [diabetes](#).

In a study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, Frank Hu, MD, of the Harvard School of Public Health found that a brisk walk for one hour daily could reduce the risk of type II diabetes by 34%.

4. Obesity. Overweight and [obese](#) conditions can be prevented or treated with exercise along with a healthy diet. Activity helps to reduce body fat and increase muscle mass, thus improving your body's ability to burn calories. The combination of reduced calories and daily exercise is the ticket to weight loss. And controlling obesity is critical, as it is a major risk factor for many diseases. Lowering your body mass index (BMI) is a sure way to reduce your risk of dying early and to live a healthier life.

5. Back Pain. Back pain can be managed or prevented with a fitness program that includes muscle strengthening and flexibility. Having good posture and a strong abdomen is the body's best defense against back pain.

6. Osteoporosis. Weight-bearing exercise (such as walking, jogging, stair climbing, dancing, or lifting weights) strengthens bone formation and helps prevent the [osteoporosis](#) or bone loss often seen in women after [menopause](#). Combine a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D with regular weight-bearing exercise for maximum results.

According to *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, data from the Nurses' Health Study showed that women who walked four or more hours per week had 41% fewer hip fractures than those who walked less than an hour a week.

"Exercise can help you cope with [stress](#) and ward off [depression](#) and [anxiety](#)."

7. Psychological Benefits. Improved self-esteem is one of the top benefits of regular physical activity. While exercising, your body releases chemicals called endorphins that can improve your mood and the way you feel about yourself. The feeling that follows a run or workout is often described as "euphoric" and is accompanied by an energizing outlook. Exercise can help you [cope with stress](#) and ward off depression and anxiety.

And these are just a few of the ways exercise improves your health. Studies have suggested it can also help with certain types of [cancer](#), improve immune function, and more.

Putting It All Together: Exercise and a Healthy Diet

Exercise alone produces modest weight loss; when combined with a reduced-calorie diet, the effects are much more impressive.

In a study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, University of Pittsburgh researchers found that people who exercised regularly and ate a healthy, modest-calorie diet lost weight and improved cardiorespiratory fitness regardless of the length or intensity of their workouts.

Another study published in *JAMA* showed that it is never too late to reap the benefits of physical activity. Sedentary women 65 years and older who began walking a mile a day cut their rates of death from all causes by 50%.

Resistance, Resistance

If exercise is so good for us, why aren't people doing it?

Some 64% of men and 72% of women fail to fit in activity on a daily basis, according to data from the 2000 National Health Interview Survey. Americans today are no more active than they were a decade ago.

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends a combination of aerobic exercise (the type that makes you breathe harder, like walking or jogging) for cardiovascular conditioning; strength training (like lifting weights or calisthenics) for muscle toning, and stretching to improve your range of motion.

Strive for doing all three types, but remember that any exercise is better than nothing. Here are some easy ways to work physical activity into your life:

- Adopt a dog and take it for walks every day.
- Do things the old-fashioned way -- get up and change the television channel; open the garage door manually; use a push lawnmower.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator.

- Walk briskly whenever you can.
- Minimize use of your car; walk to destinations within a mile.
- Take up tennis or any other game or sport you enjoy.
- Join a gym or health club.

Next time you are tempted to skip exercising, keep these wonderful health benefits in mind and remember, every little bit helps. You may not feel up to a rigorous workout, but how about a walk in the neighborhood?

Don't pass up a chance of a lifetime -- that is, a longer and healthier one.

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