

## The Benefits of Physical Activity

We all know physical activity has many benefits and that we should exercise more frequently. So what is holding us back? The most common barrier is time. A common misconception that adds to this barrier is the idea that physical activity needs to be difficult in order to provide benefits. According to recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American College of Sports Medicine, adults should get at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking) on five or more days per week. Now, do not be intimidated by this recommendation and decide to forgo physical activity altogether. Opportunities for physical activity abound in our everyday life. During our daily activities, we need to be more aware that we are actually getting exercise, but not in the conventional way. For example, carrying groceries, laundry, or kids, raking leaves, mopping, making the bed, etc. all qualify as exercising. The challenge is putting enough minutes together to accumulate the benefits.

Take each of these individual activities and creatively expand on them. As an example, if you are cooking a meal, you can do arm circles, leg lifts or bicep curls while waiting for the timer to ring. Before you put down the laundry basket, lift it from your waist to eye level several times. March in place while watching TV. Calf raises are great while you are waiting in line. Physical Activity is everywhere!

Regular physical activity improves your cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength and flexibility. Improving your cardiovascular fitness will keep you from running out of breath next time you climb the stairs. Improving your muscular strength will create strong muscles that will help you do things like carry your groceries and do yard work. In addition, muscle building burns calories and benefits our bones. Improving our flexibility is also very important. Muscles that are not used become small and lose elasticity. As we age, our joints stiffen up, decreasing our range of motion and preventing everyday tasks like reaching, turning, and bending without aches and strains. Increasing your flexibility can also help to keep your body in proper alignment, prevent back and leg pain, and provide support for good posture.

What are some specific benefits of physical activity?

- Physical activity strengthens your heart:
  - It pumps more blood through your veins, increasing the size of your arteries, preventing fat and plaque from clogging your arteries.
  - It increases HDL ("good" cholesterol) and decreases LDL ("bad" cholesterol).
  - It prevents onset of high blood pressure (if you are at increased risk of developing it) and lowers your blood pressure (if you already have high blood pressure)
- Physical activity strengthens your lungs:
  - It helps your lungs develop greater capacity increasing your ability to take in more oxygen and nourish your cells. As lungs become better conditioned, climbing stairs will not make you run out of breath!
- Physical activity keeps bones and muscles strong
  - Strength training and weight-bearing exercises help preserve bone mass and may even increase bone density.
- Physical activity helps manage your weight:

- Your weight is determined by the number of calories you eat each day, minus what your body uses. Everything you eat contains calories, and everything you do uses calories, including sleeping and breathing. Physical activity burns extra calories.
- Physical activity prevents and manages diabetes:
  - It can help insulin work better and can lower blood sugar. As you exercise, your muscles use sugar for energy by removing it from your blood, lowering blood sugar.
- Physical activity helps ease depression, manage pain and reduce stress:
  - It helps balance chemicals in your brain which helps fight depression. Physical activity also stimulates the production of endorphins, the natural pain relief chemicals helping you relax.
- Physical activity reduces your risk of certain cancers:
  - It helps lower the risk of colon, prostate, endometrial and breast.
- Physical activity helps you sleep better:
  - It can help you relax and sleep better at night.

So, now that you know how to find exercise opportunities hidden in your daily routine, are you ready to step it up a notch? Just add a little extra effort. Find a chair and slowly get up and down 10-20 times (according to your ability and comfort level). You can also pick up two water bottles and exercise your biceps by bringing the bottles up to your shoulders and bringing them back down with your elbows against your body.

Next time you are doing your laundry, challenge yourself by picking the basket up and putting it down about 10 times; you will be doing your heart, lungs, bones, and mind a fantastic favor!