

# Exercise: How To Get Started

Before beginning an exercise routine, you should talk to your family provider. This is especially important if you haven't been active, if you have any health problems, if you're pregnant, or if you're an older adult.

Ask your provider about how much exercise is right for you. A good goal for many people is to work up to exercising 5 times a week for 30 to 60 minutes at a time. If 30 to 60 minutes at a time sounds difficult to fit into a busy schedule, you can split up your physical activity into smaller chunks of time. Try exercising for 10 minutes at a time throughout your day. For example, take the stairs instead of the elevator at work. Or go for a walk during your lunch break. Even if you do not think you have time to exercise, try to find ways to build it into your day. For example, try bodyweight squats while watching TV or walking outside while making phone calls. Remember: Exercise has so many health benefits that any amount is better than none.

## **Path to improved health**

The best type of exercise is one that you will do on a regular basis, so choose activities that you enjoy. Look for activities that increase your heart rate. These activities should also move large muscles (such as the muscles in your legs and arms). Walking is a popular choice and does not require special equipment. All you will need is some appropriate walking shoes. Other good options include swimming, biking, jogging, and dancing.

Exercising with a friend or a family member can make it more fun. Having a partner to encourage you can help you stay on track.

## **Is there anything I should do before and after I exercise?**

You should start an exercise session with a warm-up of about 5 to 10 minutes. Start by slowly stretching your muscles, and then gradually increase the intensity of your activity. For example, begin walking slowly and gradually pick up the pace.

After you are finished exercising, cool down for about 5 to 10 minutes. Stretch your muscles and let your heart rate slow down gradually. You can use the same stretching exercises you did during your warm-up period. If you are going to exercise your upper body, be sure to use stretching exercises for your arms, shoulders, chest, and back.

## **Warm-up and cool-down stretching**

When performing any of the stretches described below, keep the following in mind:

- Keep your breathing slow and natural. Do not hold your breath.

- Move slowly and steadily. Avoid jerky movements to prevent injury.
- Do not bounce while stretching. Bouncing can cause muscles to tear.
- Only go as far as you feel comfortable. You should listen to your body and back away if you feel any pain. Hold each stretch for 20-30 seconds.

### ***Arm Stretch – Triceps***

Raise your right arm above your head. Bend it until your elbow is pointed toward the ceiling and your hand is behind your head. Grasp your elbow with the left hand and lean gently toward the left. Try not to bend forward during the stretch. Hold for 20 seconds and then relax. Repeat 2 to 3 times on each side.

### ***Arm Stretch – Biceps***

Extend your arms behind your back, keeping your elbows straight. If possible, interlock your fingers with your palms facing inward. Slightly lift your arms up and toward the ceiling. Hold for 20 seconds and then relax. Repeat 2 to 3 times.

### ***Mid-back Stretch***

Extend your arms in front of your body, keeping your elbows straight. Avoid lifting your shoulders toward your ears. Interlock your fingers if possible, and gently pull forward to feel your shoulder blades stretching. Hold for 20 seconds and then relax. Repeat 2 to 3 times.

### ***Calf Stretch***

Face a wall, standing about 2 feet away from it. Keeping your heels flat and your back straight, lean forward slowly and press your hands and forehead to the wall. You should feel stretching in the area above your heels. Hold for 20 seconds and then relax. Repeat 2 to 3 times.

### ***Quad Stretch***

Face a wall, standing about 1 foot away from it. Support yourself by placing your right hand against the wall. Raise your right leg behind you and grab your right foot with your left hand. Gently pull your heel up toward your buttock, stretching the muscles in the front of your right leg for 20 seconds, and then relax. Repeat 2 to 3 times with each leg.

### ***Groin Stretch***

Squat down and put both hands on the floor in front of you. Stretch your left leg straight out behind you. Keep your right foot flat on the floor and lean forward with your chest into your right knee. Gradually shift weight back to your left leg, keeping it as straight as possible. Hold for 20 seconds and then relax. Repeat 2 to 3 times with each leg.

## *Hamstring Stretch*

Lie down with your back flat on the floor and both knees bent. Your feet should be flat on the floor, about 6 inches apart. Bend your right knee up to your chest and grab your right thigh with both hands behind your knee. Gradually straighten your right leg, feeling gentle stretching in the back of your leg. Hold for 20 seconds and then relax. Repeat 2 to 3 times with each leg.

## **What is strength training?**

Most kinds of exercise will help your heart and your other muscles. Strength training is exercise that develops the strength and endurance of large skeletal muscle groups. It is also called “resistance training” or “weight training.” Lifting weights is an example of this type of exercise. Exercise machines and free weights can provide strength training. Push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, and leg squats are also strength-training exercises. Even low-weight dumbbells and body weight movements can be a good place to start for building and maintaining muscle.

These sorts of resistance exercises are essential for our health, and can decrease risk of heart disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis.

Your provider or a trainer at a gym can give you more information about exercising safely with weights or machines. If you have high blood pressure or other health problems, be sure to talk to your family provider before beginning strength training.

## **How hard do I have to exercise?**

Measuring your heart rate (beats per minute) can tell you how hard your heart is working during an activity. You can check your heart rate by lightly pressing the tips of your first 2 fingers on the inside of your wrist to take your pulse. Or you can place your fingertips on the side of the trachea (windpipe) on your neck. Count your pulse for 15 seconds and multiply the number of beats by 4. To time the 15 seconds, use the timer function on your smartphone or a watch or clock with a second hand. If you have a smart phone or smart watch, this may be able to measure your heart rate as well.

Most people will get the greatest benefit and lower their risks if they keep their heart rate between 50% and 85% of their maximum heart rate when exercising. To figure out your maximum heart rate, subtract your age (in years) from 220. This number is your maximum heart rate. To figure out your target heart rate range, multiply that number by 0.50 and 0.85.

For example, if you are 40 years of age, subtract 40 from 220 to get your maximum heart rate of 180 beats per minute ( $220 - 40 = 180$ ). Then, multiply 180 by 0.50 and 0.85 to get your target heart rate range of 90 to 153 beats per minute ( $180 \times 0.50 = 90$  and  $180 \times 0.85 = 153$ ). When you first start an exercise program, aim for the lower end of your target heart rate range. As your exercise program progresses, you can gradually build up to a higher target heart rate.

If you are taking medicine to treat high blood pressure, you have a heart condition, or you are pregnant, talk to your family provider to find out what your target heart rate should be.

### **Things to consider**

To avoid injuring yourself during exercise, don't try to do too much too soon. Start with an activity that is easier for you, such as walking. Do it for a few minutes a day, several times a day. Slowly increase the amount of time and the intensity of the activity. For example, increase your walking time and speed over several weeks.

Trying to push yourself too hard in the beginning could cause muscle strain or sprain or tendon injuries. When this happens, you'll have to wait for the injury to heal before continuing your exercise program. This can really sidetrack your health goals.

### **When to see a provider**

Pay attention to your body. Stop exercising if you feel very out of breath, dizzy, faint, nauseous, or if you feel pain. Talk with your family provider if you have questions or think you have injured yourself seriously.

### **Questions to ask your provider**

- Am I healthy enough to begin an exercise program?
- Are there any exercises I should avoid?
- Do I have any health condition that would affect my ability to exercise?
- Am I taking a medicine that would interfere with exercise?
- How can I build an exercise plan into my lifestyle?

Copyright © American Academy of Family Physicians

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject.