

For your health

Exercise

The benefits of physical activity and exercise

Physical activity (and exercise) is a cornerstone of a healthy lifestyle. Not only does physical activity make you look and feel better, but it is also critical for improving your health and extending your life. Being active significantly lowers your chances of developing potentially fatal illnesses, including heart disease, diabetes and cancer. In addition, remaining active throughout your life can help you stay healthy and disability-free as you age.

Starting a fitness program

Once you've decided to become more active, the next move is creating an exercise program that will work for you. This process can be broken down into four simple steps:

- Set some goals
- Measure your fitness level
- Choose your activities
- Make a commitment to exercise

Set some goals. Ask yourself what you want to achieve. Are you hoping to lose some weight, lower your blood pressure or

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increase your stamina? Choosing the right goals will make a big difference in your ability to stick with your program.

Measure your fitness level. Before you begin any exercise program, it is important to gauge your current level of fitness. This will help you to determine a safe and realistic starting point and fine-tune your personal fitness goals. There are several simple assessments you can perform to figure out where you are on the fitness spectrum. One of these is your body mass index (BMI), a mathematical calculation that gauges your body composition. Determining your resting heart rate and taking a one-mile walking test will give you an indication of your cardiorespiratory fitness. Other self-tests can help you measure your muscle strength and flexibility.

Choose your activities. The best form of exercise is one that you will stick with. In addition to incorporating all the necessary fitness components (resistance training, aerobic activity and stretching and flexibility exercise), the ideal exercise regimen should suit your lifestyle, schedule and present fitness level. Think about what forms of exercise you enjoy (you may love biking but hate swimming, for example). Also consider other factors. For example, do you prefer

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to exercise indoors or outdoors? Do you prefer exercising by yourself, or do you find that exercising with others is more motivating?

Make a commitment to exercise. This may be the hardest step of all. Work, family, school and other obligations can all eat into your exercise time. In addition, frustration, boredom or even something as seemingly harmless as a minor cold can throw you off track. Arming yourself with techniques to help you stay motivated and recover from setbacks can make all the difference.

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