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How to Increase Your Family's Physical Fitness

Exercise is essential to good health and fitness, and studies also have demonstrated that exercise contributes to overall happiness by improving our mood. In spite of the known benefits of exercise, physical inactivity has become a serious problem for adults and children alike in the United States.

Many adults and children today are victims of the age of automation. We are driven to and from work and school. Once we arrive at our destination, we spend the majority of the day sitting at a desk, engaged in activities that may work our mind but do little to keep our bodies fit. At the end of the work or school day, we arrive home only to spend more hours sitting in front of the television or computer. In addition to not getting enough exercise, we tend to consume high calorie, high fat, nutritionally lacking snacks during our periods of inactivity.

Current recommendations state that children and adults should strive for at least 30 minutes daily of moderate intensity exercise. This goal can be met through a wide range of family activities that not only will provide exercise but enjoyment as well. Parents need to become role models for their children at an early age. If your children see that you are physically active and having fun while you exercise, they are more likely to be active and stay active later in their lives.

Here are some simple ways to increase your family's level of physical activity:

- Plan a family hike through a scenic park. If you announce to your children that everyone in the family will be required to take a 2-mile walk on Saturday, chances are good that your idea will be met with resistance. However, if you turn the walk into a family outing and allow your children to participate in the planning, your children will be more likely to cooperate.
- Challenge your children to a basketball, volleyball, tennis or baseball game. Children like the idea of competing against adults. They are likely to have fun, and, at the same time, everyone physically benefits from this activity. This also promotes being active at any age.
- Join a community center that offers fitness and recreational programs. Check out your local YMCA or department of recreation. Many of these organizations offer community sports, and some also have swimming pools, skating rinks and fitness centers that the entire family can enjoy.
- If your child is involved in organized sports, offer to help out. Coaching is not the only way to get involved in your child's sports program. Offer to help at the concession stand or transport children to and from games. If you stay involved in your children's activities, chances are greater that they also will wish to remain involved.
- Emphasize fitness and fun, rather than competition and perfection. Not every child is going to be a great athlete. When children are made to feel inferior, they tend to withdraw from organized sporting activities.
- When picking indoor activities, select those that will offer some type of physical activity. Bowling, skating or touring a museum are better choices than seeing a movie.
- Allow your children to include their friends when you are planning your exercise activities. Establishing friendships and forming peer groups are of vital importance to your children. Your children will be more likely to want to participate in activities that include their friends.



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- Discuss ways that everyone can be more active in daily life. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Park farther away from mall entrances. Take a short walk after dinner. Don't drive somewhere that you can easily walk.
- Limit the amount of time that is spent watching television and playing video and computer games. Allow your child to select one or two favorite programs and do not leave the television turned on continuously. (Studies show that the average American child spends about 24 hours each week watching television.) Bargain with your children. For every hour of television they watch, get a commitment for equal time engaged in physical activity.
- Try not to take away physical activities as punishment for your child. Exercise promotes good health and is needed on a daily basis. If necessary, withhold other activities that will not interfere with your child's need for physical activity.
- Don't stifle informal play. While organized team sports have value, encourage your children to "play" often. Some of the best ways to promote fitness and creativity are through playing outside with friends. Openly support physical education and recess at your child's school. With so much emphasis on classroom learning, physical education time is constantly fighting the chopping block of school budgets.

Keeping Your Child Healthy: The Latest Guidelines for Well-Child Visits

In 2008, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) updated the recommendations for well-child checkups from birth through age 21. The new guidelines strengthen the focus on prevention and finding problems early, when treatment has the best chance of success.

One of the biggest changes is the addition of screening for autism disorders in the second year of life. This change comes on the heels of AAP guidelines that help doctors identify the signs of autism and refer children for treatment. Early intervention has been shown to have long-term benefits.

In general, the update includes more well-child visits in the early years and some changes in the testing done during these visits. The added visits help doctors:

- **Keep immunizations on schedule**
- **Observe the developing child more closely**
- **Address any concerns the parents have**

These extra visits can also help a doctor know a child better and build a trusting relationship.

What's changed?

The main changes include:

- Checking newborns within two to three days after hospital discharge for feeding problems and jaundice
- Screening for developmental problems at ages 9, 18 and 30 months
- Screening for autism at 18 and 24 months



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- Referral to a dentist starting at 12 months
- Checking body mass index (BMI) starting at 24 months, which can help a doctor assess the risk for weight-related problems
- Assessing for risk factors of cholesterol problems (dyslipidemia) at ages 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 years and then every year, with cholesterol testing done between ages 18 and 21
- Three new routine visits, at ages 30 months, 7 years and 9 years

How often does my child need a checkup?

The AAP recommends that:

- Newborns should see their doctor within three to five days after birth and within two to three days after leaving the hospital.
- Babies should be seen at age 1 month, 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 9 months and 12 months.
- Toddlers should be seen at age 15 months, 18 months, 24 months and 30 months.
- After age 3, children should see their doctor once a year.

These guidelines are for healthy children. Children who have health problems or are at risk may need to see their doctor more often.

Insurance coverage may vary, check your policy to see how many well-child visits are covered.

Kid Fit: Helping Kids Win at Fitness

Kids and fitness

Obesity is fast becoming a serious health problem facing children today. Consider these statistics:

- Obesity in children and adolescents has more than doubled in the past 30 years.
- More than one in four U.S. children are overweight, and 15 percent of them are very overweight or obese.

Researchers have already established that an adolescent who is now overweight runs a 70 percent risk of becoming an obese adult. It is a known fact that obesity in adulthood increases the chance that you will develop serious health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease. Physicians are encountering an increasing number of adolescents and young adults who have already developed these serious health problems.

Two Biggest Factors in Childhood Obesity

1. Decline in physical activity



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2. Increased consumption of higher calorie, higher fat content foods such as fast foods and poor-choice snacks

Obesity in Children

It's a fact: more and more children in the United States are becoming overweight and obese. Because of this problem, the American Heart Association (AHA) updated the Dietary Recommendations for Children and Adolescents. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) agrees with these recommendations.

Diet and Exercise

Kids are eating unbalanced meals made up of high-calorie foods, and they aren't exercising enough. Children can easily get their hands on junk food, candy and fried foods, and these poor eating habits follow them into adulthood. Instead of playing outdoor sports, kids are watching TV or playing computer games.

As a result, an alarming number of children are gaining weight and developing weight-related health problems as young adults. Common problems include heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. The AHA reports that 75 percent to 90 percent of heart disease cases are related to these problems. Heart disease is the number one killer in the United States.

Based on Studies

Studies show that heart disease begins in childhood. Young people don't usually think about what they're eating and how it might affect their health, but this attitude needs to change.

The AHA urges children to eat more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, fish and lean meats. They also suggest less time in front of the TV or computer screen and more time exercising and playing sports.

Specific Recommendations by the AHA:

- Drink fewer sugar-sweetened drinks.
- Use unsaturated oils (like canola or corn oil) instead of solid fats (like butter or margarine) when cooking.
- Use the portion sizes recommended on labels when serving food.
- Serve vegetables and fruits at every meal.
- Eat fish twice a week.
- Remove the skin before eating chicken or turkey.
- Use lean cuts of meat and reduced-fat meat.
- Limit high-calorie sauces.
- Eat more whole-grain breads and cereals.
- Eat more beans and tofu and less meat.
- Choose high-fiber, low-salt, low-sugar substitutes.



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- Balance dietary calories with physical activity.
- Engage in physical activity for 60 minutes daily.
- Limit TV and computer time to less than two hours per day.
- Use non-fat (skim) or low-fat milk and dairy products daily.

Healthier People

Children need help deciding which foods to choose, how many calories to take in and how much physical activity they need. If the entire family works together within these guidelines, we can hope for healthier children who will in-turn, become healthier adults.

Overcoming Your Exercise Obstacles

Seven common excuses keep many people from the benefits of exercise. Here's how to overcome these barriers and enjoy being more active.

"I don't have time to exercise." "Exercise is boring."

Does this sound like you? If you've used these or similar excuses to avoid exercise, you're not alone. Two out of three Americans are not getting enough exercise. Don't let these excuses stop you from exercising.

Here are the top seven barriers to exercise and ways to hurdle over them:

1. **No time.** Spend a week identifying 30-minute time slots that you can set aside for exercise. Then mark your day planner accordingly. Find ways to work in physical activity into your everyday life. Park further from your office, take the stairs instead of the elevator, ride your bike to the grocery store. Other time "obstacles" to hurdle:
 1. **Travel for work.** Choose a hotel with a fitness center or pool. Pack a bathing suit and a pair of sneakers.
 2. **Family obligations.** Fit in exercise with the kids. Play together. Find time to work out when the kids are at school or staying with a friend.
2. **Lack of support from family or friends.** Tell your family or friends that you want to be more active. Ask them to support your efforts. Get your spouse/significant other or friend to jog or play tennis with you. Find a group, join a gym or a hiking, biking or running club.
3. **No energy.** We all have times when we are more energetic. If you are a morning person, maybe a before-work workout is best. If you feel an energy boost after work, then you may want to hit the gym on your way home. Others find time in the middle of the day.
4. **No will power.** If you're saying this, you may need to write yourself a contract. It may be as simple as writing down a time to exercise in your calendar or date book. You are more likely to do it if you write it down. Choose an activity you enjoy. To stay motivated, choose a reward to work toward and keep you going. Working out with a buddy (tennis partner, walking companion) will also keep it fun and keep you motivated.
5. **Fear of injury.** Talk to your doctor first to get the go-ahead to exercise. If it has been some time since you've exercised



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regularly, start out slowly so you don't get hurt. Choose a low-impact activity that won't injure your knees or other joints. Choose activity that's appropriate for your age and ability level. Remember to warm up and cool down before and after exercise.

6. **Lack the skill.** If you can walk, you can exercise. In fact, you can build an entire exercise routine around walking. If you always wanted to learn to swim or play tennis, now is the time. You may want to take a class to develop new skills.
7. **Lack of resources.** This barrier may be related to money or location. You don't need to join an expensive gym to exercise. All you need is a pair of sneakers or comfortable walking shoes. Go to a nearby park or make up your own route in your neighborhood. If there's no park nearby or your neighborhood is not pedestrian-friendly, then find a recreation program or health facility at work. And don't let the winter keep you from staying in shape. Take your walking routine to the mall. Work out in the privacy of your home with your favorite aerobics DVD.

You probably know that exercise has many benefits, such as warding off heart disease and diabetes. Exercising 60 to 90 minutes a day can help you to reach a healthy weight. Keeping a routine of 30 to 60 minutes a day helps you stay at a healthy weight. You can even benefit if you break up your exercise program into several 10-minute intervals a day.

So don't let these excuses keep you from cashing in on the fun and the healthy returns. Check with your doctor to find out what a good activity level is for you, and then quit making excuses!

9 Ways to Exercise ... When You Don't Have the Time

Think you have no time to exercise? These strategies will help you get fit in just minutes a day.

We all know exercise can help us improve our health and lose weight. Yet, 25 percent of adults don't exercise at all, according to the U.S. Surgeon General.

Hectic schedules may be to blame. Who has the time to exercise when juggling work, school, family and more? It's worth squeezing it in, though, because regular exercise can relieve daily stress and lift your mood. At the same time, you can reduce your risks of diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

Aim to be active for at least 30 minutes most days, but it's okay to start slowly. Find activities that you enjoy. You only need to find a few minutes a day to start getting the health benefits. First, check with your doctor before you start or increase your activity level.

Tips for fitting in fitness

- **Wake up a little earlier.** Start by setting your alarm clock just 5 minutes earlier. Do stretches and jumping jacks before getting in the shower, or follow a short exercise DVD.
- **Find a workout buddy.** Exercising with a friend is more fun than working out alone and a good motivator. Ask a coworker to go for a walk during lunch or see if a neighbor wants to shoot hoops.



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- **Change into exercise clothes before leaving work.** You'll be ready for a short walk as soon as you get home.
- **Schedule your fitness activities.** If you put exercise on your calendar like other appointments, you're more likely to do it.
- **Acknowledge your successes.** Keep a log of all the times you make a healthy choice to move more, such as by taking the stairs instead of an elevator. After the first week, reward yourself with a new pair of sneakers or a cool new water bottle.
- **Create a home (or desk) gym.** If you have equipment always at the ready, it will be easy to steal five minutes to use it. A jump rope, a stability ball, exercise bands and dumbbells don't cost much or take up much room.
- **Move while you watch TV.** Don't sit idly - or worse, get a snack - during commercials. Do sit-ups or jog in place instead.
- **Play games with your kids.** Don't just watch while your kids play outside - join in their fun. Play tag or Duck Duck Goose, or just toss a ball back and forth. If your kids love video games, think about swapping their console for the Nintendo Wii. The whole family will break a sweat using special controllers to compete at boxing, tennis, golf and bowling.
- **Exercise while you work.** Raise your activity level and productivity with neck rolls or arm raises (push hands out to the side and then up toward the ceiling). Or do a few modified push-ups on the edge of your desk.

Stepping it up

After you've built short periods of activity into your day, think about times when you could lengthen each burst by a few minutes. The key is to start small and ramp up gradually.

Even if you're worn out from a busy day, try to make time for fitness. Regular exercise actually boosts your energy level. Exercise, along with restricting calories, is also important for weight loss and maintaining a healthy weight.

Next time you look for an excuse to skip exercise, remind yourself of the benefits. You're helping yourself feel good, look better and live longer. Who wouldn't want that?

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Men's Health: With a Little Help From Friends

Want to live longer? Keep exercising and eating your vegetables, but make lunch plans with an old friend, too.

Numerous studies have shown that people with strong social networks live longer and recover more quickly from illness than those without these ties.

Men - who tend to have fewer close friends than women - stand to gain the most from developing relationships. Some researchers suggest that loneliness is a risk factor for heart disease, just like high blood pressure or elevated cholesterol. People without many friends are also more prone to depression.

Social isolation - a risk factor for men

Researchers at Harvard School of Public Health studied more than 28,000 men to see if social ties had an impact on their health. Half enjoyed a large social network of family, friends, and community connections; the other half did not. After 10 years:

- Deaths in the group with few social ties were 20 percent higher than in the highly social group.
- The more-isolated men were 53 percent more likely to die from a heart-related disease than the others.
- Of those who developed heart disease, the less-social men had an 82 percent higher risk of death than the other group.
- Men with the fewest social contacts had more than double the risk of dying from accidents and suicides than men in the other group.
- Married men had a lower risk of death from any cause and half the risk of death from accidents and suicides than the unmarried men.

In addition, an American Heart Association study looked at 3,267 men (average age 62). The study reported that those with few social ties had much higher levels of a blood marker for inflammation - known to be associated with heart disease - than men with bigger social circles. Known risk factors for heart disease were taken into account.

All the same, choose your friends wisely. Other studies show your risk of heart disease can go up if your relationships are stressful.

People need people

As many as 1 in 4 Americans say they have no one to confide in about personal problems. For them, making more friends could have clinical benefits similar to making lifestyle changes.



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How do friends help us stay healthy? No one can say for sure, but theories include:

- Close friends and relatives encourage you to take care of yourself. They may get you to give up smoking, heavy drinking, or a poor diet.
- Having friends may boost self-esteem and ward off depression.
- Having social support may reduce stress and hormone levels tied to high blood pressure.
- You're more likely to be physically active if you have people to do things with.
- Some men see doctors only because a wife, partner, or friend convinces them to.
- A social circle is a valuable resource when you are sick. Friends can take you to the doctor or help out while you recover.

Generally, women are better at sharing their feelings and maintaining friendships than men. But anyone can increase their social network with a little effort. Joining a book club, bowling league, or poker group can widen your contacts; so can taking a class or doing volunteer work. Building good relationships can help keep you healthy in much the same way as a daily walk or a low-fat diet.

