

The Benefits of Regular Physical Activity

Bad habits are hard to break. Good habits can be, too. Regular (daily or at least most days of the week) physical activity is one habit that should be unbreakable if you want to maintain or improve your health.

An article in the June 14, 2000, issue of *JAMA* reports results from a large study of female nurses that found regular leisure-time physical activity reduced the risk of experiencing a stroke. On average, the more physically active the women were, the greater their

reduction in the risk of having a stroke.

If you are starting a new exercise program you should consult with your doctor first. He or she can evaluate you for heart disease or other health problems to see if you should take any extra precautions before you begin.

SHORT-TERM BENEFITS:

Short-term benefits from regular physical activity:

- A healthier heart
- Increased endurance
- Healthy muscles, bones, and joints
- Improved burning of calories
- More energy
- Better ability to cope with stress
- A sense of well-being
- Improved ability to fall asleep and sleep well

LONG-TERM BENEFITS:

Reduced risk of:

- Dying prematurely
- Dying from heart disease
- Developing diabetes
- Developing high blood pressure
- Becoming obese
- Developing colon cancer

BEING ACTIVE:

Choose a variety of activities that you enjoy doing regularly and engage in these at moderate intensity for at least 30 to 60 minutes at least 5 days per week. It is not necessary to exercise all in one session. Several 10- to 15-minute sessions can be just as effective.

EXERCISE INTENSITY:

One way to determine how strenuously you are exercising is to see if you can talk while you are exercising. If you can talk easily, you are working at a light to moderate rate – you may want to increase the rate of exercise in order to make it more strenuous. If you become out of breath quickly, you are probably working too hard.

LENGTH OF EXERCISE SESSION AND INTENSITY:

Exercise that raises your heart rate is ideal, but exercise does not necessarily need to be strenuous to be beneficial; many activities of daily living such as climbing stairs or walking from the train to your office can provide benefits. If you choose a less vigorous activity, you should spend more time doing that activity. For example, you need a longer session of brisk walking (30 minutes or longer) to experience some of the similar health benefits of a shorter session of a more strenuous exercise like jogging (15 to 20 minutes). Build up to a longer session or more strenuous exercise gradually.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Heart Association
800/AHA-USA1 or www.americanheart.org
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI)
NHLBI Information Center
301/592-8573 or www.nhlbi.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. A previous *JAMA* Patient Page on exercise was published on January 27, 1999.

CALORIES BURNED DURING PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES

Activity	Calories Burned Per Hour*	
	Man**	Woman**
Light Activity: Cleaning house, Playing baseball, Playing golf	300	240
Moderate Activity: Walking briskly (3.5 mph), Gardening, Cycling (5.5 mph), Dancing, Playing basketball	460	370
Strenuous Activity: Jogging (9 min./mile), Playing football, Swimming	730	580
Very Strenuous Activity: Running (7 min./mile), Racquetball, Skiing	920	740

*May vary depending on a variety of factors including environmental conditions.

**Healthy man, 175 pounds; healthy woman, 140 pounds.

Source: *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Third edition, 1990 (adapted from McArdle, et al., "Exercise Physiology," 1986).

Additional Sources: American Heart Association, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, The AMA Family Medical Guide

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