

► EXERCISE FOR WOMEN — MORE BENEFITS THAN MEET THE EYE ◀

Why should I exercise?

Exercise offers many health benefits to women. Aerobic exercises, such as brisk walking, swimming, jogging, and cycling, are beneficial because they give you energy and increase your cardiovascular (heart and lung) endurance. Weight-bearing exercises, such as walking or jogging, and resistive exercises, such as weight training, can help prevent the loss of bone mass (osteoporosis) common to older women. In general, exercise lessens many of the symptoms of premenstrual syndrome and menopause. Some medical studies have shown a link between regular exercise and reduced risk for certain women's cancers. And of course, any regular exercise routine will help you to lose weight or maintain your ideal weight, which makes you look better and feel better.

Can anyone begin an exercise program?

Anyone in good health can start an exercise program. Of course, if you are pregnant or under a doctor's care for any other reason, get your doctor's approval before starting any new physical activities. Likewise, see a doctor first if you have high blood pressure, smoke, are overweight or are over 40 years old and have never exercised before.

Why is exercise good for my heart? Why is that important?

Your heart is a muscle that pumps blood throughout your body. Regular aerobic

activities strengthen your heart by making it work harder. At the same time, they increase your body's ability to use energy-giving oxygen. Since heart disease is the number one killer of women in this country, building cardiovascular endurance — that is, strengthening the heart, lungs, and circulatory system — should be a priority in every woman's fitness program. Aerobic exercises are the most efficient way to do this. Remember, though, that for effective conditioning, you must choose activities that elevate your heart rate and keep it elevated for a period of at least 20 minutes straight, three times a week. Stopping and starting in the middle of your exercise is not as effective. However, it's okay to start slowly and, as the days and weeks go by, progress up to at least 20 minutes. Also, every exercise session should include a proper warm-up and cool-down with stretching.

How can I tell if I'm working my heart hard enough?

In order to improve cardiovascular fitness, you must exercise hard enough to make your heart beat faster than it does at rest. How much harder will depend on your age and physical condition. To calculate this you can use this simple formula: $220 - \text{age} \times 75\% =$ your target heart rate. A general rule of thumb is, you should be able to talk, but not sing while performing your activity. If you can't talk, you're working too hard; if you can sing, you're not working hard enough.

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How often should I exercise?

You should exercise at least three times a week. Aerobic exercises can be performed every day with no adverse effects. Resistive exercises, such as weight training or toning exercises, should be done every other day, to allow your muscles to recover. If you break your fitness pattern — especially if you stop exercising for more than six weeks — you will lose your conditioning benefits. You will need to begin building up your endurance all over again.

Do housework or childcare count as exercise?

Any activity is better than no activity. Certainly, heavy housework and chasing after children can increase your heart rate temporarily and give you some muscle tone. But these are no substitute for a regular fitness routine.

I've been exercising, but I'm still not losing weight.

A balanced, low-fat diet with the appropriate number of calories, combined with a sustained exercise program, is the best way to lose weight. If you exercise regularly without cutting calories or fat grams, you will lose weight more slowly. However, you should still notice a change in your body as your muscles become firmer.

As you progress in your exercise program, your body replaces fat cells with muscle, which weighs more. Thus, you may begin to look more slender even before a change shows up on the scale. As you continue to exercise, you will lose weight.

Will exercise affect my menstrual cycle?

A vigorous exercise routine can affect a woman's menstrual cycle. With excessive, intense exercise, you may find that you have less frequent menstrual periods, or you may not menstruate at all. Of course, these changes can be due to factors other than exercise. If you stop menstruating, consult your doctor to find the cause.

Other menstrual irregularities, such as bleeding or spotting between periods, and bleeding and pain after sexual intercourse, are not related to exercise. If you experience changes in your menstrual cycle, see your doctor.

I'm pregnant. Can I still exercise?

Exercising during pregnancy can help keep you both fit and comfortable as your pregnancy progresses. It will also help you get back into shape more quickly after your baby is born. Consult with your doctor about specific exercises you wish to do — your fitness level before you got pregnant and your condition during pregnancy will determine what exercise routine is acceptable for you.

You will find that the extra weight you are carrying will make you work harder as you exercise. Other changes that occur during pregnancy, such as a shift in the body's center of gravity, and the increased laxity of joint ligaments, will affect what one can do. Let your body guide you, and don't push yourself. Some healthcare institutions and fitness facilities offer special exercise classes for pregnant women.

Walking is an excellent exercise during pregnancy, particularly for women who did not exercise regularly before becoming pregnant.

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OK, I'm sold. How do I begin?

Getting started is the hardest part of getting fit. Here are some tips to help get you on your way:

- Plan time for exercise as you would a business meeting or other important engagement. Write it down in your calendar or appointment book.
- Find a buddy to exercise with, someone who will keep tabs on you. The peer pressure might be just what you need to stay motivated.
- Tell yourself you're only going to exercise for five minutes. Chances are, once you get started, you'll do more.
- The number-one reason for quitting is lack of time. Choose a spot to exercise that's convenient to home or work.
- Pick an activity that's fun for you.
- Vary your routine.

- Have a backup routine for emergencies. For instance, if you normally walk outside and it's raining, walk in a mall instead. Or exercise to videotapes.

Remember that part of being fit includes weight control, proper nutrition, stress reduction and healthy lifestyle choices. Becoming fit means saying "no" to unhealthy habits such as smoking, alcohol and drug misuse. A fit lifestyle can increase the number and quality of the years ahead of you.

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