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# Promoting Physical Exercise and Activity in Children

Physical inactivity — lack of exercise — has become a major problem in the United States for all age groups. More than 60 percent of American adults do not exercise regularly, including 25 percent who are not active at all. Also, nearly half of American youths 12-21 years of age are not vigorously active on a regular basis.

This decrease in physical activity is associated with an increase in overweight Americans. The percentage of young people who are overweight has more than tripled since 1980. Among children and teens aged 6 – 19 years, 16% (over 9 million young people) are considered overweight.

Overweight children usually carry their excess weight into adulthood. There are even more inactive adults than there are inactive children. The good news is that parents can help reverse this trend, promoting healthy habits among their children by making a commitment to practice these habits themselves.

## Importance of activity

Research has shown that regular physical activity offers significant health benefits, and even modest increases in exercise can have health-enhancing effects, which include:

- Reducing risk of chronic diseases such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, high blood lipids, cardiovascular disease and obesity
- Lowering risk of colon cancer
- Increasing bone density
- Reducing anxiety, improving body image and mood
- Improving the ability to perform daily tasks without undue fatigue
- Managing weight

## Duration and intensity of physical activity

Current recommendations suggest that children and adults should both strive for 60 minutes of physical activity every day, or most every day. Adults should strive for at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week. People who find it hard to exercise continuously will get almost as much benefit from breaking their activity into several shorter bouts of ten to fifteen minutes each. Research shows that children and adults who already exercise regularly can gain even greater benefits by increasing the intensity and length of their activities.

## What is low, moderate and vigorous intensity physical activity?

Moderate-intensity activity refers to a level of effort equivalent to 50 percent to 70 percent of a person's maximum heart rate. Maximum heart rate can be predicted easily by subtracting 220 minus your age (MHR

= 220 – your age). It would also refer to the effort a healthy individual might expend while briskly walking, mowing the lawn, dancing, swimming, or bicycling on level terrain.

Low-intensity activities include walking casually, stretching, playing golf or horseshoes, and performing light housework such as vacuuming and sweeping, and putting groceries away. All of these tasks require efforts equivalent to 30 percent to 50 percent of a person's maximum heart rate.

High-intensity activities include any exercise greater than 70 percent of maximum heart rate. These typically include running and bicycling on uneven terrain, jumping rope, mowing the lawn with a pushmower and competitive sports such as soccer, basketball, and lacrosse.

### **Ways to promote physical activity among children**

One of the best ways to get your children physically active is to get involved yourself and be a role model. If your children see that you are having fun being active, then they are more likely to become active themselves. Plan activities such as walking, dancing or biking into your family's daily schedule. Let your children help to decide the activity. Also, encourage your children to get involved in competitive or non-competitive after school sports or clubs such as walking/running clubs, inline skating, jumping rope, water aerobics and intramural swim teams. Studies show that, in addition to the physical benefits associated with exercise, physical activity may also improve academic performance, self-concept and mental health.

### **Quick tips for children and physical activity**

- Encourage your child to walk or ride a bike to school or to visit a friend.
- Limit the time your child spends watching TV and playing video games to less than 2 hours per day. Encourage going out to a playground, park, gym or swimming pool instead.
- Find out about exercise or sports programs at your child's school or in your community.
- Plan physical activities with family or friends. It is more fun to exercise with other people!
- Instead of watching TV after dinner, go for a walk with the family and take the dog too!
- Encourage your child to get involved in sports, rather than being an observer.
- Become more active throughout your day and encourage your family to do so as well. For example, take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Exercise should be fun. Don't make winning the only goal.

Finally, physical activity is only one of many every day behaviors that affect overall health. Nutrition and mental health are also very important. Don't be afraid to teach your family healthy eating habits by planning meals according to the MyPyramid guidelines and try to eat meals together as a family as often as possible.

Most of all though, in addition to plenty of love, children need good role models. Get involved with your children's activities. You'll improve your own quality of life, and you may even live longer - inactive adults have twice the mortality of adults who are at least somewhat active.

Good exercise habits that start early will promote longer, healthier, and happy lives.

#### *1. CDC Overweight and Obesity, revised 6/10/05*

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