

Improving Fitness through Physical Activity

Written by: Joanne Knowlton, Educational Program Coordinator
UNH Cooperative Extension, Nutrition Connections Program

By now you probably know that regular physical activity provides numerous benefits and that many diseases can be prevented by keeping yourself active throughout your life. Regular activity can give you more energy, improve your mood, firm your muscles and reduce body fat, lower your weight, reduce stress and depression, and lower your risk of chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure. However -- are you finding it difficult to actually work physical activity into your day?

To begin with, choose an activity that you will really enjoy doing. If it's not something you really want to do, it'll be all too easy to find excuses not to do it. Also remember that physical activity does not need to be strenuous to provide health benefits. The recommendation is for at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity (such as brisk walking) most days of the week. You can break your activity into smaller blocks throughout the day, rather than doing it all at one time. Making the commitment to do some type of physical activity is more important than the intensity or duration of each exercise session. Be sure to plan physical activity into your daily schedule, choosing a time that works well for you and that you can stick to every day. Set realistic goals for increasing your daily activity, and begin slowly to avoid injury and frustration.

Think about what you want to get out of your program. If your goal is weight control, start with a low-impact or no-impact **aerobic activity**. You can gradually increase the length of your sessions to more effectively burn calories. These exercises also improve the fitness of your heart and lungs, lowering your risk of heart disease and other chronic diseases. If your goal is strengthening your muscles, there are several **strength or resistance activities** that utilize free weights, rubber resistance bands and tubing, or your body's own weight. You might want to try some **flexibility and balance exercises** such as yoga, tai chi, or stretching, to prevent injuries or stiff joints.

You may not become hooked on exercise overnight, but eventually the sense of feeling better and healthier will overpower any barriers that still exist. Don't you think you owe it to yourself to discover the rewards of exercise?

The University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension is an equal opportunity educator and employer. UNH, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture and New Hampshire counties cooperating. "Helping You Put Knowledge and Research to Work."