

Physical Activity for Health

The benefits of doing regular physical activity include a reduced risk of: heart disease, stroke, bowel cancer, breast cancer, osteoporosis, and obesity. In addition, many people feel better in themselves. Regular physical activity helps you to control your weight, and is also thought to help ease stress, anxiety, and depression.

How much physical activity should I take?

To gain health benefits you should do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, on most days (at least five days per week).

- **30 minutes per day** is probably the minimum to gain health benefits. However, you do not have to do this all at once. For example, cycling to work and back 15 minutes each way adds up to 30 minutes. Try to increase the amount to 40-60 minutes per day if you can.
 - For people who need to manage their weight and are at risk of putting on weight and becoming obese, it should be for 45-60 minutes.
 - For people who have been obese, or are still obese and have lost weight, it should be for 60-90 minutes.
 - For older people, the above recommendations still apply, depending on ability.
 - Children should get at least one hour a day of moderate physical activity.
- **Moderate physical activity** means that you get warm, mildly out of breath, and mildly sweaty. It does not have to be intense. However, some evidence suggests that the more vigorous the physical activity, the better for health - particularly for preventing heart disease.
- **On most days.** You cannot 'store up' the benefits of physical activity. You need to do it regularly.

What sort of physical activity?

Anything that makes your heart rate increase, and makes you at least mildly out of breath. For example: brisk walking, jogging, swimming, cycling, dancing, badminton, tennis, etc. You can even use normal activities as part of your physical activity routine. For example, fairly heavy housework, DIY, or gardening can make you mildly out of breath and mildly sweaty. Consider a brisk walk to work or to the shops instead of using a car or bus, etc.

What are the health benefits of physical activity?

Heart disease and stroke

On average, the risk of developing heart disease such as angina or a heart attack is reduced by about a third in people who are regularly physically active compared to those who are not. You are also less likely to have a stroke. Physical activity is good for the heart muscle, but it also reduces some 'risk factors' for heart disease and stroke. For example, on average, blood pressure, cholesterol, and body weight are lower in people who are regularly physically active compared with those who are not.

If you already have heart disease, regular physical activity is usually advised as an important way to help prevent the heart disease from getting worse.

Weight control

Physical activity helps to burn off excess fat. Regular physical activity combined with a healthy diet is the best way of losing excess weight, and to maintain a healthy body weight.

Osteoporosis

Regular physical activity helps to prevent osteoporosis ('thinning of the bones'). The pulling and tugging on the bones by the muscles stimulates bone-making cells which strengthens the bones.

Cancer

Regular physical activity roughly halves the chance of developing cancer of the colon (bowel cancer). There is also evidence that breast cancer is less common in women who are regularly physically active.

Mental health

Physical activity is thought to help ease stress, and improve general well-being and self-esteem. Regular physical activity can also help to ease anxiety and depression. It can also help to make you sleep better. (But do the activity during the daytime or early evening, not near to bed time.)

Older people

If you are over 70, you are less likely to fall and be injured if you are regularly physically active.

Are there any risks with physical activity?

- **Injury.** Sprains, and sometimes more serious injuries, are a risk if you do some types of activity such as competitive sports. You can cut down the risk of injury by always warming up before any vigorous activity, and by wearing the correct footwear.
- **Endurance sports** such as marathon running can cause stress fractures, fatigue, and cause menstrual periods to stop in some women.
- **Sudden death** sometimes occurs in people who are doing some physical activity. This is rare if you are used to moderate physical activity. It is more likely to occur if you do not usually do much physical activity, but then do a sudden bout of vigorous activity such as an intense game of squash. However, even in this situation, sudden death is uncommon.

If you gradually build up to do regular moderate physical activity, the potential health gains greatly outweigh the small risks involved.

Some other points about physical activity

- If you have a condition that concerns you about physical activity, then see a doctor before starting a physical activity programme. However, there are few reasons why physical activity may be harmful. A common wrong belief is that physical activity may be "bad for the heart". On the contrary, physical activity is good for most people with heart disease.
- If you are not used to physical activity, it is best to gradually build up the level of activity.
- One of the biggest obstacles is the uphill battle to become fit. Many people feel that the first few attempts at physical activity are quite a struggle. Do not get disheartened. You are likely to find that each time it becomes easier and more enjoyable.
- Try and keep physical activity high on your list of priorities. If one kind of activity becomes boring, try switching to other types to maintain the health benefits.
- Some people set their goals too high. For example, aiming for a marathon run. This may take too much time, you may lose enthusiasm, and physical activity may become a drudge. Beware of this pitfall.
- Physical activity is not just for young 'sporty' types. It is never too late to start to gain the benefits, no matter how old or unfit you are.

The bottom line: realistically, walking is likely to be the activity chosen by many people. But, this is fine as brisk walking is an excellent moderate physical activity. One report about physical activity stated: "The bottom line - walking two miles a day can cut the risk of death by half".

Note: The British Heart Foundation and the Countryside Agency are running a 'Walking The Way To Health' initiative to encourage people who do little physical activity to walk more in their own neighbourhoods. For more information: Tel: 01242 533258 Website www.whi.org.uk