

Exercise: A prescription to live longer and healthier

By Jacob Hayman, MD

Many people suffer from illnesses like high blood pressure, adult onset diabetes, depression, obesity, osteoporosis (weak bones), cancer and heart disease. We in the medical field often ask patients to take medications to help treat these maladies. In many cases, we overlook the simple and effective treatment of exercise. This article will describe the definition of moderate intensity physical activity. It will point out the very real benefits of moderate intensity activity as well as the very dire consequences of inactive lifestyles. We will also discuss how to start an exercise program that can help you live longer and healthier.

Inactive lifestyles are estimated to contribute to 200,000 deaths annually in the United States. Conversely, exercise has been proven to decrease the risk of dying from heart disease and from dying prematurely. Further benefits of exercise include reducing your risk for developing diabetes, high blood pressure and colon cancer. Additionally, exercise has been proven to reduce feelings of anxiety and depression and increase mental wellbeing. For those individuals with high blood pressure, exercise has been proven to help reduce your blood pressure - just like the medication your physician may be asking you to take. Other benefits of exercise include weight loss, and building and maintaining healthy bones, muscles and joints. It has even been verified that elderly adults that exercise move better and reduce their risk of falling.

Although the benefits of exercising are known by many, some very scary facts remain. For example, 25 percent of all adults are not active and inactivity increases with age. Nearly half of young people aged 12 – 21 are not vigorously active on a regular basis and their physical activity declines as they become adolescents.

So how do you combat the statistics and reap the benefits of exercise? One way would be to follow the recommendations of the American Heart Association and the American College of Sports Medicine. These leaders in the field of exercise and health recommend that either moderate intensity physical activity for 30 minutes for a minimum of five days a week, or strenuous exercise for 20 minutes a day three days a week, or a combination of the two will help people realize the health benefits of exercise.

The definition of moderate intensity physical activity is any activity performed at an intensity of three to six metabolic equivalents. In plain language this translates to walking briskly at three to four miles per hour, pleasure cycling, moderate effort swimming, cleaning the house and mowing the lawn. Further examples of moderate intensity physical activity and the time needed to gain benefit are seen in table 1. The less vigorous the activity the longer you need to do it to get health benefits.

Now that you have some examples of what can be done, the next major obstacle is making exercise a priority and finding the time to move. The first trick is adding more activity into your already busy life. Some examples include parking your car at the far end of the parking lot so you have to cross the whole lot twice when you shop; dancing while you vacuum or sweep the floor; using the stairs instead of an elevator; shopping more often for less food and, if you are close enough, walking or biking to the store instead of driving. Other examples include doing exercises while watching TV; stretching while cooking dinner; and cooking dinner instead of buying prepackaged food - which is better for your diet, too! Walking with your kids down to the bus shelter every morning

can be a great way to start up your metabolism and help you burn more calories and lose weight. You could also consider walking to the post office from home or work instead of driving.

Finding time is often the most difficult part to starting a routine. As shown above there are many ways around this. Doing physical activity that adds up to 30 minutes is just as good as doing a continuous 30 minutes. Therefore, one can take a brisk 10 minute walk while on a 15 minute break and if you do this 3 times you have met your daily requirement. Any more activity only adds to the health benefit.

Once you have started an exercise routine the next step in sticking to it. Many people find that doing exercise with a friend keeps them accountable. Some people set walking/jogging dates or weight lifting times after work and if one person is tired the positive energy of the other partner is often enough to get the tired person moving. Further more, once people start an exercise routine they often feel physically and mentally better. This helps keep people motivated. The key is to figure out little ways to keep exercise “fresh” and part of your daily routine.

Now that I have gotten you excited about the health benefits of exercise, I need to place a word of caution. To avoid soreness and injury, individuals thinking about increasing their physical activity should start slowly and gradually build up to the desired amount. People with chronic health problems like heart disease, diabetes or obesity should first consult a physician before beginning a new exercise program. Also, men over 40 and women over 50 years old who plan to begin a new vigorous physical activity program should consult a physician first to ensure they do not have heart disease or other health problems.

Although seeing a physician can be scary, time consuming or financially daunting, when looking at it as an investment in one’s health and future, it is well worth while. We hope that this article has shed light on the importance of incorporating physical activity as a routine part of your day. Even though many obstacles can make starting a new exercise routine a challenge, the alternative can often have dire consequences. From this doctor’s perspective, the medical benefits so greatly outweigh the risks that it is not a matter of *should* you start an exercise program; it is a matter of when! If you still have questions about starting a new exercise program, you can always speak with a provider at the Iliuliuk Family and Health Services clinic.

Table 1

Less Vigorous, More Time
Washing and waxing a car for 45-60 minutes
Washing windows or floors for 45-60 minutes
Playing volleyball for 45 minutes
Playing touch football for 30-45 minutes
Gardening for 30-45 minutes
Wheeling self in wheelchair for 30-40 minutes
Walking 1 3/4 miles in 35 minutes (20 min/mile)
Basketball (shooting baskets) for 30 minutes
Bicycling 5 miles in 30 minutes
Dancing fast (social) for 30 minutes
Pushing a stroller 1 1/2 miles in 30 minutes
Raking leaves for 30 minutes
Walking 2 miles in 30 minutes (15 min/mile)
Water aerobics for 30 minutes
Swimming laps for 20 minutes
Wheelchair basketball for 20 minutes
Basketball (playing a game) for 15-20 minutes
Bicycling 4 miles in 15 minutes
Jumping rope for 15 minutes
Running 1 1/2 miles in 15 minutes (10 min/mile)
Shoveling snow for 15 minutes
Stairwalking for 15 minutes
More Vigorous, Less Time

* A moderate amount of physical activity is roughly equivalent to physical activity that uses approximately 150 Calories (kcal) of energy per day, or 1,000 Calories per week.

+ Some activities can be performed at various intensities; the suggested durations correspond to expected intensity of effort.