

Exercise

Lack of regular physical exercise is a risk factor for chronic diseases of the lifestyle including obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease (heart disease and stroke). In comparison to those who exercise regularly, inactive people double their risk of suffering a heart attack and have an increased risk of dying immediately after such an attack.

The heart is a muscle and needs exercise to stay fit and healthy. The heart of someone who exercises regularly will beat 45-50 times per minute compared to someone who does not exercise regularly whose heart will beat 70-75 times per minute. This means 36 000 extra beats per day and 13 million extra beats every year.

The benefits of regular exercise:

- Reduces the risk of heart disease and stroke
- Improves the efficiency of the heart and lungs
- Improves 'good' cholesterol levels
- Helps lower high blood pressure
- Helps reduce and control body weight by decreasing body fat, increasing muscle and increasing metabolic rate
- Helps control blood sugar levels and reduces the risk of developing diabetes
- Helps to manage stress
- May help to improve your sleeping pattern
- Increases energy, stamina and muscle strength
- Increases resistance to fatigue
- Increases enthusiasm and optimism and so helps to manage anxiety and depression
- Counters risk conditions (obesity, high blood pressure, poor cholesterol levels, poor lifestyle habits, etc.) that lead to heart attack and stroke
- Delays/prevents chronic illnesses/diseases associated with aging
- Helps reduce symptoms of PMS
- Reduces risk of bowel and breast cancer
- Weight-bearing exercise reduces the risk of developing osteoporosis
- Smokers who exercise are twice as successful in their attempts to quit.

Which types of exercise work best?

Beneficial physical activity not only includes the more demanding types. Walking, dancing, gardening, cycling, bowls, golf, swimming and other similar physical activity, including occupational, recreational and usual daily chores also contribute to well being.

To improve cardiovascular fitness, choose an activity that is rhythmic and repetitive (aerobic exercise) because it strengthens the heart.

Consult your doctor before starting an exercise programme.

How much exercise do I need?

To help your heart, exercise should be constant and last long enough to increase the blood flow to the muscles. Start slowly and increase your intensity levels (time and frequency) as your heart gets stronger.

The three important aspects of exercise:

Intensity: start slowly and gradually increase the pace to a level where the heart and breathing rates are increased enough to make you sweat. Another way of monitoring exercise intensity is to use the 'talk test' i.e. when exercising, you should be able to talk throughout the workout. Another guideline is to exercise at 60-80% of maximum heart rate.

Time: try to keep moving without interruption for at least 10 minutes and build it up to at least 30 minutes OR try to accumulate at least 30 minutes of exercise during the day (3 shorter walks are just as beneficial as 1 long walk).

Frequency: regular exercise is of extreme importance at least 5 times per week! Try to spread it out throughout the week for the best results.

If you exercise regularly, you will soon find that you will get less tired and will be able to do more as you progress. Advice on exercise mode, intensity, frequency and duration should be modified individually, taking into consideration your condition, situation and other medical problems.

Tips to help you to make healthy lifestyle change permanent:

- Make exercise a priority and schedule time for it in your day
- Be strict with yourself, especially when you start an exercise programme
- Choose an enjoyable and sustainable form of exercise
- Set small, achievable goals, but also have a long-term goal
- Keep track of progress - keep a logbook of the type and length of exercise, as well as changes in weight and body measurements
- Reward yourself each time you achieve a goal

- Share positive experiences with those close to you
- Get support from family, colleagues and friends and encourage participation
- Join a group or programme or take the dog for a walk
- Instead of snacking, go for a walk
- Instead of taking the lift, take the stairs
- Walk or cycle instead of driving (if possible)
- Park further from the shopping centre when you go shopping

Frequently Asked Questions

If I exercise, will it prevent heart disease?

Physical inactivity, along with cigarette smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes and high blood cholesterol, are major modifiable risk factors for heart disease. There is no guarantee that you won't get heart disease, but the chance of developing heart disease is decreased if you avoid the risk factors.

I have been inactive for years. Should I see a doctor before I start becoming physically active?

People middle-aged or older who are inactive and at high risk for heart disease (or who already have a medical condition) should seek medical advice before they start exercise or significantly increase their physical activity. Most healthy people of any age can safely engage in moderate levels of physical activity (e.g. moderate walking, gardening and yard work) without consulting a doctor first.

How much physical activity is enough?

If you're inactive, doing anything is better than nothing! Studies show that those who have a low fitness level are much more likely to die early than people who have achieved even a moderate level of fitness. If you want to exceed a moderate level of fitness, you need to exercise at least five times a week for 30 to 60 minutes at 60-80% of your maximum capacity.

Does exercise counteract the harmful effects of other risk factors?

Studies show that being physically fit lowers heart disease risk, even in those who have other health problems such as high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol. However, you cannot smoke and eat unhealthily and expect to work off the damage by exercising. Exercise should be done as part of a healthy lifestyle that includes following a healthy balanced diet, moderate alcohol intake (if any), maintaining your ideal body weight and not smoking.

Is it too late for a senior citizen to become physically active?

More and more seniors are proving every day that they aren't too old to exercise. In fact, the older you are, the more you need regular exercise. However, it is important to take some special precautions:

- If you have a family history of heart disease, consult your doctor before starting an exercise programme
- Don't try to do too much too fast - exercise at an intensity appropriate for you
- Pick activities that suit your needs and that you can do all year-round
- Wear comfortable clothing and footwear
- Choose a well-lit, safe place with a smooth, soft surface
- Take time to warm up and cool down and stretch slowly
- Don't rely on your sense of thirst - drink water on a fixed schedule

This is one in a series of brochures. For the full series and more heart smart information call the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 or visit www.heartfoundation.co.za