

Step Up to a Healthier You!

"I just do not have the time to exercise! "I have too much work to do!" "I am too old for exercise!"

Sound familiar? These are just a few of the many excuses given when it comes to fitting some kind of fitness into your life! Sadly, for many, exercise is seen as going to the gym only as well as "time consuming" or just "too much of an effort!" This should not be the case - any exercise that increases the heart rate for an adequate amount of time (as explained below) is great for the heart and overall well-being.

If you know what the benefits are of incorporating some physical activity into your daily life, you are sure to put more spring into your step! According to the Sports Science Institute of South Africa, 81% of South Africans have 1 or more risk factors for the development of chronic diseases of lifestyle (diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease). What's even scarier is that these risk factors account for an estimated 26% of deaths! Incorporating physical activity into your daily life can improve your health risk profile. To achieve the numerous benefits associated with being active, you may ask, how often, for how long and how intensive should my physical activity sessions be? What if I am over the age of 65 and what about kids? These are some of the issues this article will clarify in the hope of giving you, whether young or old, an insight to stepping up or starting an exercise plan.

Some Benefits of Exercise

Apart from better heart health and weight loss/control, exercise also helps to relieve/manage high stress levels, boost energy levels, improve self image, manage high blood pressure levels and increase muscle strength. In younger kids it forms part of a heart healthy lifestyle thus preventing the onset on chronic lifestyle diseases later on in life. In older people, it helps delay or prevent chronic illnesses and diseases associated with ageing.

Healthy Adults

The American College of Sports Science and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stipulate that all *healthy* adults between 18-65 years need moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity for a minimum of 5 days each week or vigorous-intensity physical activity for a minimum of 20 minutes on 3 days each week. Moderate intensity is defined as having a noticeable increase in the heart rate and equivalent to a brisk walk for example. The 30 minute session can be achieved by 3 bouts of 10 minutes each (easier if you are just starting out) or 1 session totaling 30 minutes. Vigorous-intensity activity is defined as having a substantial increase in the heart rate, causing rapid breathing and equivalent to a jog for example. It is advised that these moderate or vigorous activities be added to your general routine activities of life e.g. housework, shopping or cooking. In addition, every adult should include some resistance training to maintain or increase muscular strength and endurance. The recommendation is to perform 8-10 weight-bearing exercises on 2 or more non-consecutive days each week. This includes lifting light weights, stair climbing and similar resistance exercises that use the major muscle groups.

Older Adults

If you are an older adult (over 65 years), the recommendations are the same except that moderate and vigorous intensity activity is based on your perceived level of effort (on a 10 point scale, moderate activity is a 5 or 6 whereas vigorous activity is a 7 or 8). This is due to the varying degree of fitness levels amongst older adults, where a moderate intensity walk for some older adults may be a slow walk whilst for others it may be a brisk walk. If you are concerned that you might not reach the appropriate level of intensity, a few supervised sessions are advised as this will help you learn the level of effort required. Flexibility and balance exercises should also be incorporated into the exercise regime (possibly on days of aerobic or resistance sessions). Examples of flexibility exercises include stretches or yoga and balance exercises include standing on one leg and throwing a ball to a friend or the use of balance boards. Bear in mind that vigorous activity is coupled with a higher risk of injury and a lower level of adherence. Exercise of this intensity is usually suitable and advised for the selected older individuals with adequate experience and a higher level of fitness.

Kids

When it comes to kids' health, emphasis is placed on being more active as well! As habits from a young age tend to continue into adulthood, it is recommended that healthy principles are encouraged from as young as possible. With this in mind, kids (aged 2 and older) should engage in at least 30-60 minutes of enjoyable moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity daily and limit sedentary activities (watching television, playing computer or play station games) to no more than 1 or 2 hours per day. Parents should be role models to their children – if kids see their parents being physically active, they will be more likely to follow in their foot steps.

Generally

If you have been physically inactive, it is still best and advisable to start off slowly increasing the time and intensity of your exercise sessions in a gradual step by step manner (important particularly but not exclusively in older adults). This will help to prevent or minimise risk of injury.

If you are middle-aged or older and currently inactive, have any chronic medical conditions or have any risk factors for cardiovascular disease, it is advisable to check with your doctor and seek advice before starting any exercise programme or significantly increasing activity levels. As a general rule, people who have had an event (heart attack, stroke, etc) and older persons with chronic conditions should ideally consult a health professional (e.g. sports physiologist or related medical professional such as a biokineticist) to get an appropriate activity plan tailored to incorporate therapeutic and risk management issues.

A Few Handy Tips for Ensuring Success

- Choose activities that you like
- Vary the activities to prevent boredom
- Include activities as a family e.g. a jog on the beach
- Wear comfortable clothing and properly fitted footwear
- Find a suitable time and place to exercise
- Don't overdo it! Work your way towards fitness in a gradual step by step way
- Reward yourself (preferably not with food) at special milestones e.g. buy a new T-shirt, track suit pants or a fashion accessory

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa recommends that you follow a lifestyle that is based on heart healthy eating principles coupled with regular physical activity as well as managing other modifiable risk factors (smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, overweight/obesity, diabetes, stress). So whether it's dance classes, cycling with friends, jogging on the beach, swimming the beautiful beaches or a brisk walk with the dogs that you enjoy - it doesn't matter – all that matters is that you do it!

Remember, you are never too young, too old or too busy to engage in physical activity - it will only benefit you in the long run!

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For more free heart smart nutrition information from registered dietitians, call our Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222 or visit our website at www.heartfoundation.co.za or email heart@heartfoundation.co.za.