

It's never too late to get physical: Using exercise to promote and maintaining health

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by Eileen Beal

January is the month for making resolutions. So, since a well-thought-out exercise regimen can have a major impact on your present and future physical well-being, why not resolve to get and stay physically fit this year?

One or two hours a week is all it takes to get the fitness ball rolling, says Laurie Thomas, director of the rehabilitation department at Kethley House at Benjamin Rose Place on Cleveland's East Side, but those one or two hours of stretching and toning and revving up the system will pay big dividends.

Exercise helps strengthen the heart and lungs, revs up the circulatory system, and lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels. It strengthens and tones muscles; helps keep joints, tendons, and ligaments flexible; helps improve balance and gait; and helps slow the progress of osteoporosis, a bone-thinning disorder that affects both men and women. It burns excess calories and aids in weight control. It helps you feel less tense during the day; get to sleep faster; and sleep better at night.

In conjunction with the proper diet, physical activity-a.k.a. exercise-can delay the start of non-insulin dependent diabetes (Type II Diabetes) and help keep it in check once it has been diagnosed. Recent studies indicate that the benefits of exercise in regulating blood sugar levels last 18 to 24 hours after a workout session.

Exercise makes you feel good, too

Due to the fact that exercise improves blood- and oxygen-flow to the brain and boosts the amount of serotonin (a major feel-good hormone) in the body, exercise is a natural mood enhancer, explained Dr. Robert P. Friedland, Chief of the Neurogeriatrics Laboratory at Case Western Reserve's Medical School.

If you get into a "structured" class where class members meet on a regular basis-at a local gym or fitness center, hospital, church or synagogue, senior center, and/or "Y", or enroll in one through a local college, university, or community education department-exercise can even improve your social life. "When you are exercising in a group, the group becomes a whole new social circle for you," explained Thomas. "Actually," she added with a chuckle, "a lot of people in exercise groups get more out of it socially than they do physically."

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How to begin

Choose an activity that you like. "When you do that," explained Thomas, "you are going to have some success with it right away, and you will stick with it because it won't become a chore."

While aerobic exercise-exercise that forces the heart and lungs to work at a higher and more efficient rate; speeds up circulation so tissues, muscles, and organs get a continuous supply of oxygen-rich blood; and causes you to sweat-produces the most benefits, low-impact walking is the number one fitness activity for Americans over 55 says a National Institute on Aging (NIA) report. Other high-ranked (and highly recommended, noted Dr. Friedland), fitness activities for seniors include: swimming and water aerobics; bicycle riding, jogging, and power walking (which includes the use of hand weights); golf, tennis, and racquetball; the use of stationary exercise equipment; and line dancing, chair calisthenics, Tai-chi, and yoga classes. Men, noted the NIA report, tend to prefer outdoor activities; women indoor ones.

Set goals. "Setting a goal-to do the exercise for 30 minutes four times a week, for example," said Dr. Friedland, "can be a very good form of motivation...[and] a good way to measure progress, too."

Go slow. No matter what kind of activity you choose, start off slow, stressed Jim Bobek, a recreation therapist at MetroHealth Center for Skilled Nursing Care. "For both physical and long-term health reasons, you must start out slowly so you can build up your muscle and joint strength and your endurance," he explained. "And you should always 'listen' to your body. If things hurt, if you have muscle or joint pain, stop...[or] switch to some other form of exercise."

And, if you are over 50, are starting an exercise program from ground zero, are planning activities that are more strenuous than walking, or if you have major health problems-diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, asthma-you should visit your doctor "for a general physical, and input on what you should and shouldn't be doing," said Thomas.

For further reading:

- Exercise and Fitness for the Older Adult (1998), Wayne H. Osnes
- Fitness Book (2nd edition) (1998), American College of Sports Medicine
- Fitness After 50 (1996), Walter H. Ettinger, Jr., MD; Brenda S. Mitchell, Ph.D.; Steven N. Blair, PED

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- Lifelong Fitness: How to Look Great at Any Age (1993), Bob Delmonteque and Scott Hayes
- Seniorbics: The Fitness Guide for People 55+ (1992), Ellen Coven
- Staying Strong: A Senior's Guide to a More Active and Independent Life(2000), Bob Anderson and Donald G. Bornell