

How To Begin an Exercise Program

By Amy Cosgrove

Half the battle in starting an exercise program is making regular physical activity a priority in your life. Getting fit requires commitment and patience. If you have serious health concerns such as heart disease, diabetes or respiratory problems, it's a good idea to check with your doctor first.

Many fitness centers offer free first visits that may include an evaluation by a trainer. Getting advice from an expert can help you target the zones you need to work on most, and an exercise instructor can teach you how to perform exercises correctly to get the most benefit from your workout. A trainer or your physician can also help you determine your best target heart rate when you are exercising. Generally it is best to target a heart rate of 65% of your maximum heart rate as a beginner and work up to 75-80% as your body becomes more accustomed to regular exercise. Many indoor exercise machines have built-in heart monitors, or you can purchase portable monitors at sporting goods stores.

Beginners should start with two or three exercise sessions a week and increase the frequency, intensity and length of workouts as the body becomes more conditioned. Fitness experts recommend that you include aerobic exercise to increase the health and function of your heart, lungs and circulatory system. (Jogging, walking, cycling, aerobic dance, and stair climbing are aerobic activities). You can enhance your overall fitness by also including activities that combine upper and lower body movements such as swimming, rowing and cross-country skiing.

Strength training with weights uses increasing resistance to help build and retain muscle. It can also increase the number of calories your body burns, helping you to lose weight. For muscular benefits, weight training two days a week is a good way to start.

To stay motivated it is best to choose activities that you enjoy. Cross training helps to exercise additional muscle groups and prevents you from becoming bored. You may want to break up your routine by participating in a group class once or twice a week. Yoga, tai chi, pilates, and martial arts classes are excellent ways to build strength, flexibility, and balance while you stretch your muscles.

If you dislike the idea of exercising in public, there are many ways to pursue fitness at home. Whether you work out with a treadmill, bench weights, or dance your way to fitness with an aerobics video, it is important to set aside a time and place where you can exercise regularly. If you can't afford an expensive treadmill, stationary bike, or elliptical trainer, invest in a set of hand weights, stretch bands, or a jump rope.

Many people prefer exercising outdoors. Hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, water skiing, swimming, surfing, and playing volleyball, tennis, or basketball are excellent ways to have fun and get healthful exercise simultaneously. Exercising with a partner will enhance your odds of sticking with it. Find a partner who will walk, run or play tennis with you regularly.

Once you've graduated from beginner level, you can increase the time you devote to exercise as your fitness level progresses. Your regular exercise program might include five to 10 minutes of stretching or slow walking, 20 to 40 minutes of brisk walking or bicycling three or four times a week, and 10 to 15 minutes of weight training two or three times a week. Be sure to incorporate five to 10 minutes of cool-down stretching at the end of each session.

When you are pressed for time, break your exercise sessions into smaller segments. Try squeezing in a 10-minute walk after lunch, or a 20-minute run with your dog after work.

If you're really a couch potato at heart, try working exercise into your TV watching routine. Walk on a treadmill or jog in place while you watch the news, or try doing exercises with stretch bands as you watch a favorite show. If you're a bookworm, read your book or magazine while pedaling on a stationery bike.

Scheduling your workouts on the calendar can also help you stay on track. Don't pay too much attention to the reading on your bathroom scale. After a few months of regular exercise you should notice a significant difference in the way your body looks and how your clothes fit. Making fitness a part of your life can boost your energy level and your spirits.