

How Can Physical Activity Become a Way of Life?

If you aren't in the habit of being physically active, you're probably being told you should start. That's because regular physical activity reduces your risk of heart disease and stroke. It also helps you reduce or control other risk factors — high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, excess body weight and diabetes.

But the benefits don't stop there. You may look and feel better, become stronger and more flexible, have more energy, and reduce stress and tension. The time to start is now!



How do I start?

- Talk to your doctor about a physical activity plan that's right for you if...
 - you've been inactive a long time or have medical problems,
 - you're middle-aged or older, and
 - you're planning a relatively vigorous exercise program.
- Choose activities you enjoy. Pick a starting date that fits your schedule and gives you enough time to begin your program, like a Saturday.
- Wear comfortable clothes and shoes.
- Start slowly — don't overdo it!
- Try to exercise at the same time so it becomes a regular part of your lifestyle.

For example, you might exercise every day (during your lunch hour) from 12:00 to 12:30.

- Drink lots of water before, during and after each exercise session.
- Ask a friend to start a program with you — use the buddy system!
- Note the days you exercise and write down the distance or length of time of your workout and how you feel after each session.
- If you miss a day, plan a make-up day. Don't double your exercise time during your next session.

What will keep me going?

- Get your family into physical activity! It's great to have a support system, and you'll be getting them into an important health habit.
- Join an exercise group, health club or YMCA.
- Choose an activity you like and make sure it's convenient for you. If you need good weather, have a back-up plan for bad days (e.g., when it rains, walk in the mall instead of the park).
- Learn a new sport you think you might enjoy, or take lessons to improve at one you know.
- Use variety to keep your interest up. Walk one day, take a swim the next time, then go for a bike ride on the weekend!
- Try renting a few exercise videotapes to find the one(s) you like best. Then you can buy one or more and have a good workout in the comfort of your own home!
- Make exercise a regular routine so it becomes a habit that you do automatically.
- If you stop for any length of time, don't lose hope! Just get started again — slowly — and work up to your old pace.

What else should I know?

- Try not to compare yourself with others. Your goal should be personal health and fitness.
- Think about whether you like to exercise alone or with other people, outside or inside, what time of day is best, and what kind of exercise you most enjoy doing.
- If you feel like quitting, remind yourself of all the reasons you started. Also think about how far you've come!
- Don't push yourself too hard. You should be able to talk during exercise. Also, if you don't feel recovered within 10 minutes of stopping exercise, you're working too hard.

How can I learn more?

- Talk to your doctor, nurse or health care professional. Or call your local American Heart Association at 1-800-242-8721, or the American Stroke Association at 1-888-478-7653.
- If you have heart disease or have had a stroke, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It's very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.

Do you have questions or comments for your doctor?

- Take a few minutes to write your own questions for the next time you see your doctor. For example:

Should I take my pulse?

Can I exercise "too much?"
