Active living: fitness that fits your life

I'm so busy; I don't have time to exercise! How many times have you said that to yourself? But the benefits of an active lifestyle are many, and are not just physical. Better moods, a more robust social life, and more fun can all be part of the bargain.

Count the benefits



Regular exercise can produce tremendous results. As fitness levels increase and physical activity becomes routine, you're bound to feel more alert, energetic and alive. As exercise becomes a regular part of your life, you may notice you're even better able to cope with work and the day-to-day problems of life. Breathing, posture, and even skin can all be improved with a good fitness program.

Regular physical exercise:

- Strengthens your heart and lungs and build muscle.
- Offers improved resistance to fatigue, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and many other health conditions including high blood pressure, and perhaps even some cancers.
- Releases chemicals in your brain and body that are natural mood enhancers, which increase your physical and mental energy levels.
- Improves blood circulation to the brain and releases neurotransmitters that enhance concentration, memory, calmness and focus.
- Provides recreation, opportunities for social interaction and the chance to engage in healthy competition with yourself and others—all of which can enhance self-esteem, sense of competence and mastery, and outlook on life.

Which activities suit your health goals?

Gentle fitness. You don't have to knock yourself out to feel better. Twenty minutes of moderate exercise a couple of times a week can be beneficial to your health and well-being. Any regular activity or sport that requires sustained movement can yield benefits, including:

- Walking
- Gardening
- Low-impact aerobics
- Bicycling
- Stretching, yoga or tai chi
- Golfing
- Archery
- Bowling
- Horseshoes
- Bird watching

Activity at this level will probably not raise the heart rate to sustained aerobic levels, but will give your muscles a workout. Also, the easier pace of these pursuits lets people enjoy them for longer periods of time.

Aerobic fitness. Aerobic (or cardiovascular) fitness is the ability of the heart and lungs to supply the muscles with enough oxygen that they don't easily tire or one doesn't become "winded" when running or climbing stairs. The following exercises, done at least three times a week, promote aerobic fitness:

- Brisk walking with arms swinging

- Low-impact aerobic dance
- Swimming
- Step aerobics
- Stair-stepping, cross-country skiing or elliptical training machines

Muscular strength and endurance. Strength training is particularly important after age 30, when muscle and bone density begin to decrease. Some examples include:

- Free-weight training, weight machines or aerobic training using weights
- Push ups and sit ups
- Aerobic exercise that vigorously works legs

Weight loss. Contrary to popular belief, strenuous exercise is not the best way for the average person to lose weight. Most people can sustain regular exercise longer at a moderate pace—and thus burn more calories overall. Building up to a program of workouts lasting at least 45 minutes to an hour, four to five times a week, is generally the most effective exercise strategy for slimming down. Suitable activities include:

- Bicycling
- Brisk walking or alternating walking and jogging on a treadmill
- Energetic dancing (not necessarily aerobic dancing)
- Stair-stepping
- Stationary cycling, elliptical training and cross-country skiing machines set at a low resistance level

Tips for fitness buffs

Warm up and cool off. Whether you exercise alone or with a group, in a field or at a club, make sure you warm up before activity and cool down afterwards. Take five to ten minutes to perform exercises that will stretch out your leg, arm and back muscles to loosen them up. Pay particular attention to your neck and shoulders. This can help prevent strains during the workout and reduce muscle soreness later.

Be patient, be persistent. Getting into a fitness activity does not change your stress level. But staying with it will. That’s why it’s vital to pick a pursuit—or a group of them—that you enjoy. Remember that you don't need to go through the exact same exercise three or four times a week. You can vary the workout as much or as little as you like, but select exercises that can give the right total body workout to you.

The first few weeks of your program will be the most difficult for your muscles to accept. Start modestly with two or three sessions a week. If your body rests two full days in between days of heavy activity, chances are it will be able to handle the next round without sending you signals of distress and discouragement.

The way to an active lifestyle

Your eventual goal is to make exercise a part of your daily routine. Here are some tips to incorporate activity into your day-to-day schedule.

- Get off the couch! Instead of watching TV or a movie, plan a bike ride, rollerblading, a bowling evening, skating, swimming, or even a walk around the block. Any movement is good, and making it part of your family routine is role-modelling an active lifestyle for your children, as well.

- If you spend much of the day behind a desk, take frequent breaks. Stretch, or take a quick walk around the block. Bring running shoes, and take a walk at lunchtime.

- Take the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator.

- Exit the subway, bus or streetcar one or two stops early and walk.

- Pick a parking spot several blocks from the restaurant or movie theatre, or at the back of the shopping mall lot.

- Don’t just open the door to the back yard. Grab the leash and take a walk or run!

Don't feel the need to do it all at once. Just be persistent. You will find activity becomes easier to do over time, and you'll be able to increase its frequency. Before you know it, you'll be leading a more active, healthier lifestyle.