Get Fit and Have Fun: Doing It Your Way

You know you should exercise more, but the thought of jumping on a treadmill is about as painful as listening to nails on a chalk board. The key to a great exercise regime is to choose something you actually enjoy doing so you'll stick with it and reap the rewards of physical activity. Despite the myth, it's possible to get the "gains" without the "pain."

Start with a visit to your doctor for a check-up. Ask about the kinds of exercise that would be best suited to your physical condition and age. It's especially important to do this if you have heart, breathing or weight problems, or if you have other limiting factors, such as high blood pressure. In fact, having a physical check-up before beginning regular exercise is a good idea for anyone.

Gentle Fitness

There is evidence that suggests you don't have to knock yourself out to feel better—even 20 minutes of moderate exercise a couple of times a week can be beneficial to improve your health and well-being. Any regular activity or sport that requires sustained movement can reduce your stress, including:

- Walking
- Gardening
- Low-impact aerobics
- Bicycling
- Stretching, yoga or tai chi

Golfing, archery, bowling, baseball, horseshoes, and even bird watching can provide a good deal of beneficial exercise. Activity at this level will probably not raise the heart rate to sustained aerobic levels, but will still give your muscles a workout. Also, the easier pace of these pursuits enables people to 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 so you don't get easily tired or "winded" when running for a bus 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 (this involves stepping on and off a low bench while moving your arms, usually in time to music)
- Stair-stepping, cross-country skiing or elliptical training machines

Muscular Strength and Endurance

Strength training is popular among teenagers, but it's particularly important after age 30, when people often begin to lose muscle and bone density. Some examples are:

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

Weight Loss

Contrary to popular belief, strenuous exercise is not the best way for the average person to lose weight. That's because most people can sustain regular exercise much longer at a moderate pace, and thus burn many

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

Warm Up and Cool Off

Whether you exercise alone or with a group, in a field or at a club or community centre, make sure you warm up before peak activity then cool down afterwards. Before and after, take five to ten minutes to perform exercises that will stretch out your legs, arms and back muscles. Pay particular attention to your neck and shoulders. These short series of exercises can help prevent strains during your peak output, and reduce the muscle soreness later.

Whichever activity you choose—from bowling to weight training to volleyball—make sure it’s one you love doing. Better still, reduce boredom and maximize health benefits by doing a variety of activities throughout the week. You’ll not only be certain to stick with your routine longer, but you’ll also have fun in the process.