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How exercise builds a stronger heart

The benefits of physical activity are well-documented. Adults may be reminded of the short- and long-term benefits of exercise when visiting their physicians for annual well visits or to treat an illness. Though exercise is often viewed as a means to losing weight, it's equally important for people of all ages to recognize the many other ways physical activity benefits the body, including its role in heart health.

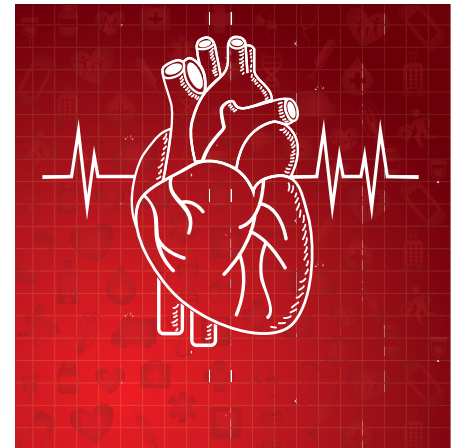
The World Health Organization reports that cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) are the leading causes of death across the globe. A host of variables can lead to a CVD diagnosis, and a sedentary lifestyle is among them. By including exercise in their daily routines, individuals can build a stronger heart that benefits their bodies in myriad ways.

Exercise, the heart and lung function

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute notes that regular moderate- and vigorous-intensity physical activity strengthens the heart muscle. A stronger heart is more capable of pumping blood to the lungs, which the NHLBI notes ensures a stronger blood flow to the muscles.

Exercise and blood oxygen levels

Exercise helps to increase oxygen levels in the blood by improving the ability of the heart to pump blood not only to the lungs, but throughout the body. That's a notable benefit, as the Cleveland Clinic notes hypoxia, a condition marked by low blood oxygen levels, can lead to adverse health conditions, such as damage to individual organ systems, including the brain.



Exercise and coronary heart disease

Coronary heart disease is a condition marked by the buildup of plaque in the coronary arteries, which the NHLBI notes supply the heart muscle with oxygen-rich blood. Moderate- and vigorous-intensity aerobic activity has been linked to a lower risk for coronary heart disease because it can help people lower their blood pressure; reduce a type of fat in the blood known as triglycerides; increase "good" cholesterol levels; help the body manage its blood sugar and insulin levels; and reduce levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), which is a sign of inflammation associated with a higher risk of heart disease.

These are just a handful of the ways that exercise can help individuals build a stronger heart. Individuals who have already been diagnosed with heart disease and have lived a largely sedentary lifestyle are urged to speak with their physicians about safe ways to incorporate exercise into their daily routines. Vigorous aerobic activity may not be safe for people who have heart disease, so anyone in that situation should not simply begin exercising on their own.

A healthy heart is a building block of a long life. More information about exercise and heart health can be found at nhlbi.nih.gov.

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Did You **KNOW?**

Encouraging children to be physically active can be an important step in helping them to be healthier later in life.

The Physical Rehabilitation Network (PRN) says active kids are more likely to become healthy adults. Studies have shown that being physically active and making smart food choices while young can lead to a reduced risk of developing many serious health conditions later in life, which can include diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, heart disease, and even certain cancers. What's more, Better Health Victoria in Australia says evidence suggests that physically active children also are more likely to mature into physically active adults. Developing fitness skills early in life is a wise choice. However, one in six kids between the ages of 2 and 19 in the United States are obese, and just one in three are physically active each day, reports the PRN. Families can work together to help kids get on paths to better health and to become more active. This may involve putting limits on screen time and encouraging outdoor play and group active activities like sports or dance.

Darrell Van Horn, D.D.S., M.S.



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Activities that can promote cardiovascular health



Resolving to be physically active is an important step towards heart health and overall well-being. Exercise is one of the most effective tools for strengthening the heart and avoiding various illnesses, including high cholesterol, that can affect cardiovascular health, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Although any exercise can be beneficial, there is a fitness recipe designed to be the most effective for strengthening the heart and helping it to work to its full potential. Here are the guidelines recommended by the American Heart Association and Johns Hopkins Medicine.

- Get 150 minutes per week or more of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes per week of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity, or a combination of both. These activities can include running, cycling, swimming, and others that will get the heart pumping.
- Incorporate moderate- to high-intensity muscle-strengthening activity at least two days a week.
- Strength training should be designed to work the entire body. It doesn't have to be traditional weightlifting, either. Body weight exercises, yoga, Pilates, and even tai chi can build strength and offer additional benefits like improving balance.

- Consider HIIT exercises. HIIT stands for high-intensity interval training, which involves exercising as hard as one can for a short period, and then resting briefly before exercising hard again for a short period. While there are many different HIIT programs, UT Southwestern Medical Center says a popular one involves exercising hard for four minutes, followed by three minutes of recovery time, for four cycles total.
- While stretching, flexibility and balance exercises do not directly affect heart health, they do help one stay flexible and free from joint pain and other issues that can sideline a person from exercise. Doing what one can to protect against falls and reduce risk of being sedentary will benefit the heart in the long run.
- Don't discount everyday activities in relation to how they can enhance heart health. Walking, gardening, playing with children, or tossing a ball to a family pet are beneficial aerobic activities.

Heart health is something to take seriously, and exercise plays a key role in strengthening the heart.



It's not uncommon for individuals engaged in strength training workout regimens to wonder how much time they should rest between sets, a situation that can only grow more difficult when going online, where advice ranges from 30 seconds to three minutes. But a 2016 study published in *The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* suggests longer rest intervals may be more beneficial than shorter breaks. That study compared 21 young resistance-trained men assigned to a group that performed resistance training programs with one-minute rest intervals between sets and a second group that performed resistance training with three-minute rest intervals. Results varied depending on the resistance activity each group was engaged in, but muscle thickness in the anterior thigh among the three-minute rest interval group was significantly greater, and that three-minute group also experienced greater increases in the triceps brachii than their one-minute rest interval counterparts. Authors behind the study ultimately concluded that longer rest periods promote greater increases in muscle strength and hypertrophy in young resistance-trained men.

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Recreational sports that make for a great workout

Billions of people across the globe share a passion for sports. Whether it's youngsters playing on sandlots, adolescents competing in scholastic sports or even professional athletes locking horns at the highest level, there's no denying that sports appeals to people of all ages.

The thrill of competition undoubtedly compels many athletes to engage in sports, but playing a sport also makes for great exercise. That's even the case for various recreational sports, which many athletes look to after their more formal playing days have ended. In fact, the following recreational sports are not only fun, but also make for a great workout.



Basketball

Basketball is among the more accessible recreational sports, as it's not uncommon for players to find a pickup game at their local park on a nice spring or summer afternoon or evening. Basketball combines various components of a great workout, including cardiovascular exercise, coordination and balance and weight-bearing activity. A 2018 study published in the *Journal of Sport and Health Science* found that both half-court and full-court basketball helped to increase lean body mass, bone mineral density and oxygen uptake, each of which helps to make recreational basketball a great way for players to improve their overall health.

Golf



The serene setting of a typical golf course can make it easy to see the sport as fun but not necessarily a great workout. But that's a misconception, as a round of 18 can make for great exercise. A 2016 study published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* noted that golf can be a useful ally in the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases such as heart attack, stroke, certain cancers, and diabetes, among other conditions. Walking the course, as opposed to renting a cart during a round, makes for excellent cardiovascular exercise as well.

Athletes may embrace recreational sports for fun, but these physical activities also can make for a great workout.



Pickleball

Perhaps no recreational sport has enjoyed a surge in popularity as significant as pickleball in recent years. The 2023 Topline Participation Report from the Sports & Fitness Industry Association indicates participation in pickleball grew by 159 percent between 2019 and 2022. Pickleball is something of a hybrid sport that combines elements of tennis and ping-pong to form a fun activity that's also great exercise. An ongoing examination of pickleball by Apple has found that participation in the sport helps players reach moderate to vigorous heart rate zones, which cardiologists note can improve cardiac fitness. In addition, a 2023 study published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* found that pickleball players enjoyed significant improvements in happiness, life satisfaction and personal well-being after taking up the sport.



Why swimming is so good for your body

Engaging in fitness activities that are enjoyable can increase the likelihood that a person will remain committed to routine exercise. In addition to being fun, swimming is an exercise that benefits the entire body. It's also ideal for people of all ages, as the buoyancy of water reduces the strain on muscles and joints.

Healthline reports that an hour of swimming burns almost as many calories as running, without all the impact to the bones and joints. Many people who commit to swimming each week may have no problem getting the recommended 150 minutes of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity each week recommended by various health organizations. Here are some of the ways swimming is good for your body.

- **Engages the entire body:** Swimming works just about all the muscles of the body. Various swimming strokes can enable a person to focus on certain muscle groups, if desired.
- **A thorough cardiovascular workout:** Swimming increases heart rate without stressing the body. The fitness level can be customized and gradually built up so that one can increase strength and endurance.
- **Reduces body fat:** Swimming can help many people slim down. According to Harvard Medical School, a 155-pound person can

burn about 432 calories swimming versus about 266 calories walking at a moderate pace for the same duration of time. A 2021 study published in *BMC Sports Science, Medicine and Rehabilitation* revealed that 16 weeks of swimming led to significant reductions in body fat and BMI among those studied.

- **Improves heart health:** Research has linked swimming to a reduction in blood pressure and additional benefits related to improved cardiovascular health.
- **Enhances lung volume:** Swimming involves deeper breathing and can strengthen the muscles involved with respiration, says Everyday Health.
- **Improves quality of life:** Older adults who swim may experience decreased rates of disability and improved quality of life. Swimming helps to improve or maintain bone health, particularly among postmenopausal women. Water-based exercise also is low-impact and builds strength.
- **Improves mental health:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that swimming can improve mood in both men and women. Swimming may decrease anxiety, and exercise therapy in warm water can improve symptoms of depression.

These are just some of the health benefits associated with swimming.

Get a good workout outdoors



Getting a gym membership is one of the first things that comes to mind when someone mentions a desire to get in shape. Exercise goals can be achieved at gyms and fitness clubs, but they are not the only locations where people can get on a healthy track. People who turn to the great outdoors for their fitness needs may find nature is an equally, if not exceedingly, effective setting to get in shape.

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology says as many as 80 percent of people who begin exercise programs do not stick with them. Seeing progress and reaching goals can be great motivators, as can doing something because it is enjoyable. Utilizing outdoor activities to get in shape can improve people's chances of exercising regularly. Here are a few ideas to kick-start a new routine.

Kayaking and paddleboarding

Water sports are perfect warm weather activities that build good upper body and core strength. Kayaking and paddleboarding also offer cardiovascular benefits by getting the heart pumping. These water activities offer a great way to exercise that doesn't often seem like exercise at all.

Hiking

Walking for pleasure gained popularity in Europe during the eighteenth century. Hiking involves taking long, vigorous walks on trails or footpaths. The varied terrain is an excellent cardiovascular exercise and can strengthen the lower body.

Park circuit

Many public parks have exercise equipment along trails or walking paths. Individuals can follow a circuit with little to no rest in between. If a park doesn't have dedicated equipment, one can use kids' jungle gym equipment to perform pull-ups, incline pushups, lunges, and additional strength-training exercises.

Climbing and scrambling

Climbing hills and mountains is a challenging way to get in shape and improve physical fitness. Climbing involves working muscles all over the body. It also requires balance and flexibility.

Sports

Volleyball, baseball, tennis, pickleball, and other organized sporting activities can offer aerobic and strength-training benefits. Sports typically are played among a group, and the sense of companionship and good-natured competition that often develops in such settings can keep participants engaged and having fun.

Beach workouts

In addition to ocean swimming, walking or running on the sand adds resistance to movements that can enhance fitness and challenge the heart.

The great outdoors can be a great place to combine exercise with enjoyable activities.



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Exercise can be good for the brain



It is well documented that physical activity can be beneficial for the body, but what about the effects of exercise on the brain? Exercise enthusiasts will be glad to learn there are some notable ways that physical activity can benefit the brain.

A 2018 study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* indicated that much evidence shows that physical exercise is a strong gene modulator that causes structural and functional changes in the brain that can benefit cognitive functioning and well-being.

Exercise also seems to be a protective factor against neurodegeneration.

Dr. Scott McGinnis, an instructor in neurology at Harvard Medical School, says there is a lot of science behind exercise boosting memory and thinking skills. Exercise can encourage production of growth factors, which are chemicals that affect the growth of new blood vessels

in the brain and even the number of brain cells and their ability to thrive. Various studies point to exercise causing growth in the parts of the brain that control thinking and memory. The World Health Organization even notes that about two hours of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week can help improve thinking and memory skills.

Another study, led by a team of sports scientists at the University of Geneva, grouped 350,000 people in the United Kingdom according to genetic variants associated with more or less physical activity. Those who had a genetic proclivity toward being active tended to perform better on a set of cognitive tests. Additional studies have found that more physical activity correlated to better cognitive performance at age 69 among individuals who had been tracked for

30 years.

Although many health professionals agree that exercise is good for the brain, the amount of exercise and where it takes place also may play a role in cognitive health. A 2023 study published in *Scientific Reports* found that time spent in natural outdoor environments led to increases in cognition similar to those resulting from acute exercises. Researchers found that when exercise and nature are combined, the impact on cognition is magnified.

Researchers have not pinpointed whether one exercise is better than another for improving brain health. Walking is one way to start, as it is accessible for people of all ages and requires little to no equipment. Anyone beginning an exercise regimen should discuss plans with a doctor and speak about their exercise goals.

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Weight training for beginners

A well-rounded fitness regimen is made up of various components, including strength training. Strength training can be mischaracterized as an activity best suited to individuals looking to bulk up. However, strength training is about much more than just maxing out on the bench press.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, muscle-strengthening activities reduce the risk of falls and fractures, which is a notable benefit for adults of all ages, and particularly so for adults nearing an age where they might experience mobility issues. The National Institute on Aging notes that studies indicate as many as

three in 10 individuals over age 70 experience mobility issues that affect their ability to walk, get up out of a chair and climb stairs. Adults in middle-age, and even those for whom retirement remains decades away, can prevent such issues by incorporating strength training into their workout regimens. Novices who want to do just that can heed these tips to avoid injury as their bodies acclimate to strength training.

• Work with a personal trainer. Fitness facilities typically have highly trained and knowledgeable personal trainers who can teach members the proper techniques in regard to various strength-building exercises. Many facilities offer one or two free personal trainer consultations

to new members, and it's best that people of all ages take advantage of such benefits. Even if sessions are not complementary, working with a personal trainer is a great way to learn proper form, which is vital to avoiding injury.

• Warm up before weight training.

The Mayo Clinic notes that cold muscles are vulnerable to injury, so individuals should never begin weight training sessions without a pre-workout warmup. The fitness experts at Gold's Gym note that 10 minutes of light cardiovascular exercise on a treadmill, stationary bike or elliptical machine before strength training can increase range of motion, decrease risk for injury and help to create more change in muscles. If necessary, include a foam roll and stretch exercise in your warmup, targeting the muscles that will be used during the ensuing weight training session and any muscles that seem particularly tight. Foam rolling each muscle for 20 to 30 seconds can help to loosen them in advance of a workout.

• Start with light weights. The adage "Rome wasn't built in a day" is certainly applicable to weight training. Initial weight training sessions should involve light weights as the body acclimates to a new workout and individuals master the form for each exercise. Weight can be gradually increased as individuals acclimate to lifting weights, a process

that the Mayo Clinic suggests can unfold over two to four weeks. However, each individual is different, so if it takes longer than four weeks to add weight, so be it. The key in the early days is to master the form and help the body adjust.

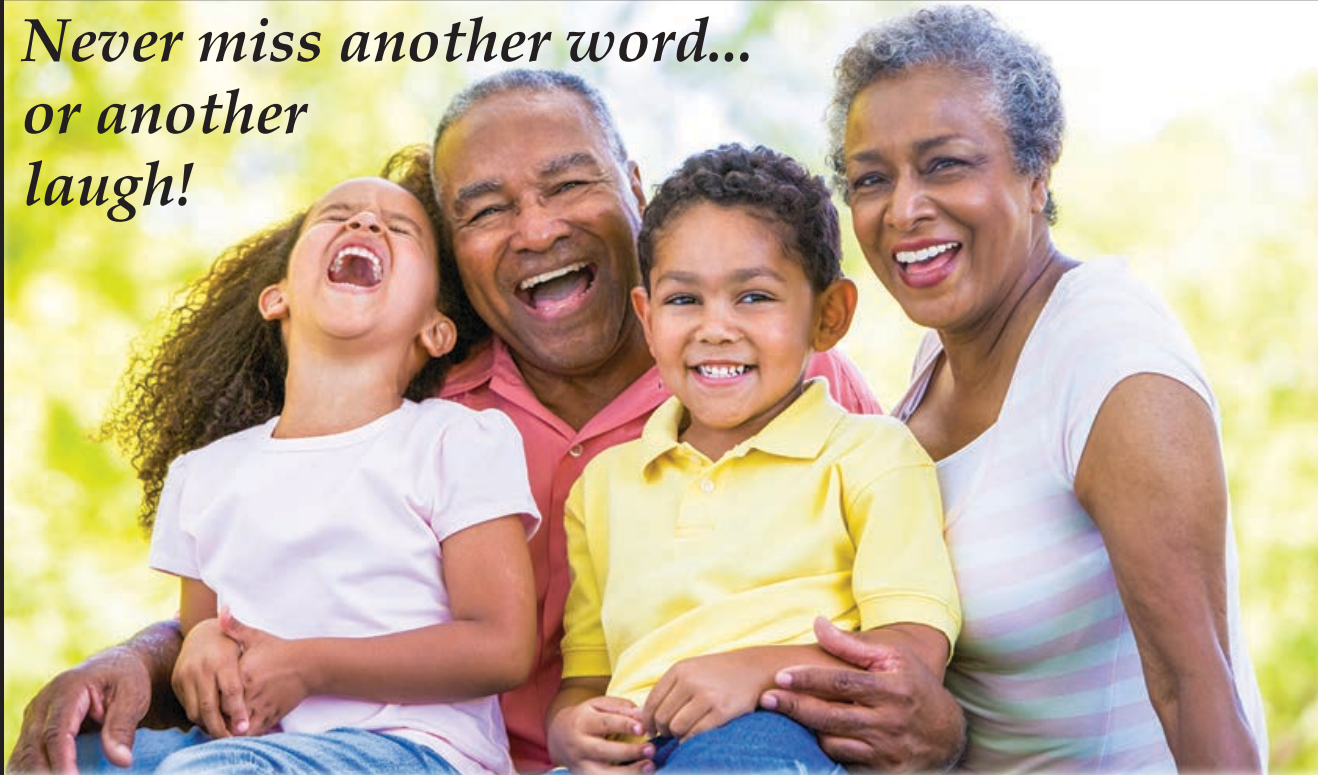
• Lift slowly. The Mayo Clinic notes that using momentum during a set can lead to injury, as the goal is not to swing or lift the weights as quickly as possible. Slow repetitions that take about two seconds to lift the weight and four or more seconds to lower it can reduce injury risk and also activate muscle fibers in the targeted muscles, which makes strength training more effective over the long haul.

• Rest and take pain seriously. Rest is a vital part of a successful weight training regimen, and it's especially important for novices to rest in between sessions. The Mayo Clinic recommends resting muscles for at least 48 hours. Do not ignore sharp or shooting pain or assume it's a natural byproduct of the transition to strength training. Cease performing any exercise that causes such pain and consult your physician about what to do.

Weight training promotes long-term health, and beginners need not be intimidated by hitting the gym to build strength.

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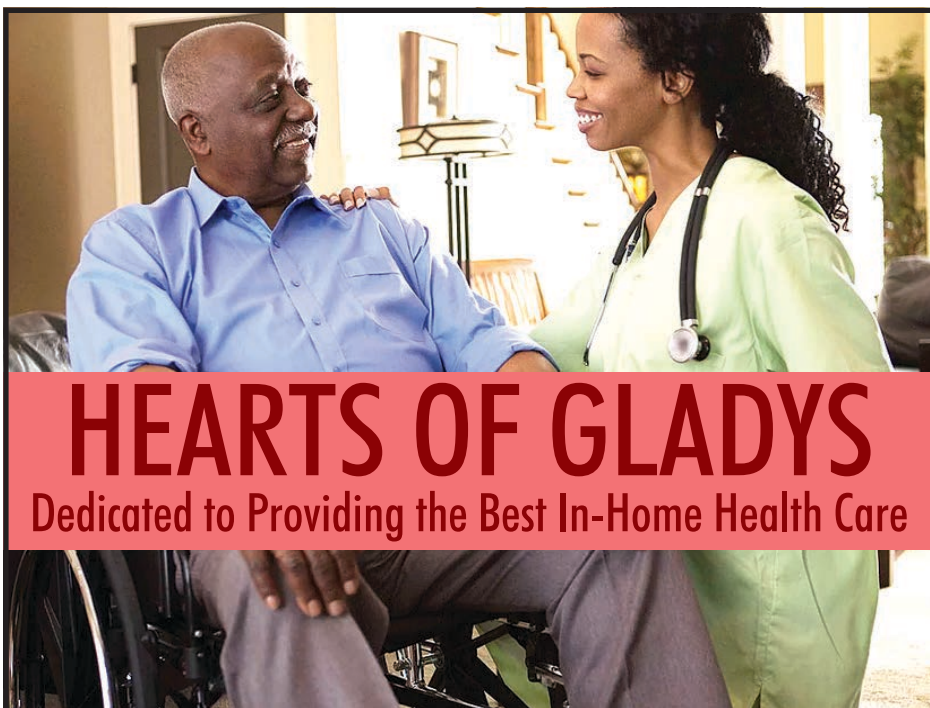
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How to reduce your risk for soft-tissue injuries



Soft-tissue injuries are a notable concern for anyone engaged in routine physical activity. The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons notes that such injuries affect muscles, tendons and ligaments and often occur while engaged in physical activities like sports and exercise.

Soft-tissue injuries run the gamut from acute problems like sprains and contusions to more lasting conditions like tendinitis and bursitis that tend to arise from overuse. Seasoned athletes may see soft-tissue injuries as an unwanted yet unavoidable consequence. However, the AAOS notes that many such injuries can be prevented with proper conditioning and training.

- **Wear appropriate attire.** The AAOS recommends replacing athletic footwear as they wear out and wearing comfortable, loose-fitting clothing that allows for free movements and the release of body heat.

- **Avoid overdoing it with any one type of workout.** A well-balanced workout regimen is not only a pathway to overall health but also a great way to prevent soft-tissue injuries. The AAOS advises individuals to adhere to a fitness regimen that balances cardiovascular exercise, flexibility and strength training. Limit each workout session to no more than one or two activities.

- **Warm up before each workout.** According to the Mayo Clinic, cold muscles are vulnerable to injury, so a body that goes from full resting position to one suddenly in the throes of a demanding workout is more likely to suffer a soft-tissue injury than one that gradually makes that transition. The AAOS advises warming up by running in place for a few minutes and breathing slowly and deeply before gently rehearsing the motions of the exercises to come. Warmup sessions increase athletes' heart rates and promote blood flow that helps to loosen muscles, tendons, ligaments, and joints.

- **Hydrate.** Drinking enough water to prevent dehydration, heat exhaustion and heat stroke is another way for physically active individuals to reduce their risk for soft-tissue injuries. The AAOS notes that proper hydration involves drinking water before, during and after a workout. A pint of water 15 minutes before a workout and another after cooling down is recommended. In addition, the AAOS recommends having a drink of water every 20 minutes or so while exercising.

- **Cool down after a workout.** Cooling down for a period of roughly 10 minutes before fully stopping a workout can reduce risk for soft-tissue injuries. The AAOS recommends slowing motions and reducing the intensity of

movements during a cooling down session.

• **Stretch.** Cooling down and stretching are not one and the same. After cooling down, slowly and carefully stretch until reaching a point of muscle tension, holding each stretch for between 10 and 20 seconds. Inhale before a stretch and exhale as the stretch is released. The AAOS recommends performing each stretch only once and advises against stretching to the point of pain.

• **Know when to rest.** Rest is vital for recovery, which is equally important for avoiding injuries. The AAOS notes that fatigue and pain are sufficient reasons to take a day off.

• **Commit to routine exercise.** Make exercise part of your daily routine, and not just something you do on weekends. Off days are vital, but exercising only on weekends can increase a person's risk for soft-tissue injuries.

Soft-tissue injuries sideline many athletes every day. Taking steps to prevent such injuries can help individuals stay the course with their fitness goals.



The link between physical activity and healthy weights

Anyone aspiring to lose weight is likely aware that there are no shortage of approaches promising to bust belly fat and slim waistlines. Weight loss fads come and go, but daily physical activity remains a reliable and effective approach to shedding extra pounds.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that physical activity provides both short- and long-term benefits. Among the more long-term benefits of regular exercise is the link between physical activity and how it facilitates an individual's ability to maintain a healthy weight. Though people may experience some notable initial weight loss after they begin a fitness regimen, they also can maintain that weight loss if they remain committed to exercise over the long haul.

The CDC notes that more physical activity increases the number of calories a body uses for energy. If individuals looking to turn over a healthier leaf couple a commitment to exercise with a healthier diet that includes consuming fewer calories, they can create a calorie deficit that ultimately contributes to weight loss.

The link between exercise and long-term weight loss is worth noting, as the CDC notes that



research has found the only way to maintain weight loss is to remain engaged in regular physical activity. Individuals attempting to lose weight for a particular reason, such as an upcoming wedding or a vacation, should know that exercise and a healthy diet can help them accomplish that goal. However, it's highly likely they will regain that weight if they do not continue to exercise after reaching their target weight loss goal. If the thought of regaining lost pounds is not enough to compel people to maintain their commitment to exercise, and honor all the hard work and determination required to lose the weight, perhaps a rundown of health risks associated with being overweight or obese might provide the motivation necessary to stay the course. According to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney

Diseases, being overweight or obese increases a person's risk for a host of diseases and conditions, including:

- Type 2 diabetes
- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Metabolic syndrome
- Fatty liver diseases
- Certain types of cancer, including cancers of the breast, liver, kidney, pancreas, and ovaries, among others
- Gout
- Fertility problems
- Sexual function problems
- Mental health problems

Routine physical activity is a great way to help people shed extra pounds so they can reach and maintain a healthy weight.

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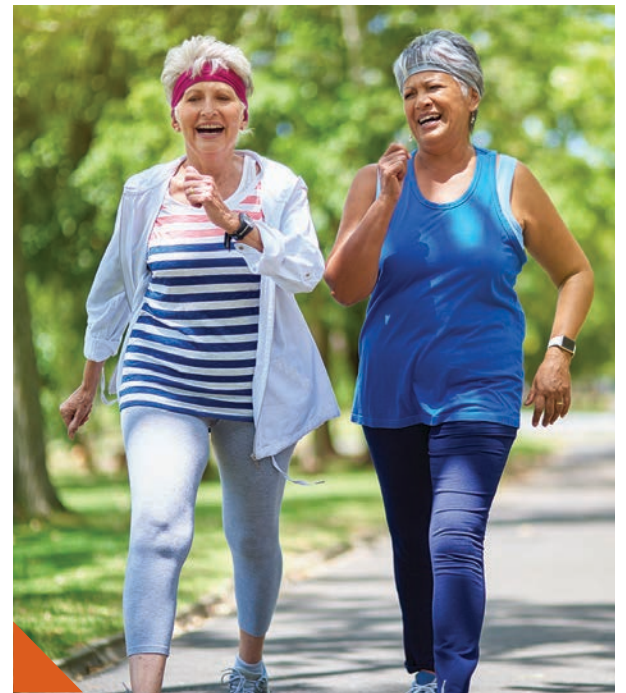
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Walk your way to better overall health



People turn to many different exercises and pieces of fitness equipment to get in shape and lose weight. What they may not realize is that one of the most effective health strategies requires no additional gear except a quality pair of athletic shoes. Walking is one of the easiest and most accessible activities that can improve overall health. In fact, walking is now being touted as “the closest thing we have to a wonder drug,” according to Dr. Thomas Frieden, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Indeed, walking offers a host of benefits, including:

- Reduces the risk of developing breast cancer by as much as 14 percent, according to the American Cancer Society.
- Helps a person maintain a healthy weight and lose body fat.
- Improves cardiovascular fitness by strengthening the heart.

- Improves muscle endurance.
- Helps to prevent or manage conditions like stroke, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and type 2 diabetes, according to the Mayo Clinic.
- Boosts immune function to make a person less susceptible to common viruses like the cold and flu.
- Eases joint pain associated with arthritis, and can even prevent osteoarthritis from developing in the first place, according to Harvard Health.
- Helps tame cravings for sweets and other fattening or sugary foods.

The faster and more frequently a person walks, the greater the benefits. One also can alternate periods of leisurely walking with brisk walking as a form of interval training to burn more calories and improve cardiovascular fitness.

Your loved one may qualify for hospice care and not even know it.

Don't miss out on the no-cost benefits that may be available for your family.



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Limit added sugars.

Get plenty of sleep.



Be physically active.

Quit smoking.

Minimize stress.

Reduce salt intake.

KNOW THE SYMPTOMS OF HEART DISEASE:

- Pain, numbness or tingling sensations
- Shortness of breath or trouble breathing
- Chest pain during physical activity
- Lightheadedness, dizziness or confusion
- Headaches
- Cold sweats
- Nausea/vomiting
- Tiredness or fatigue
- Swelling of the ankles, feet, legs, stomach and/or neck
- Reduced ability to exercise or be physically active
- Problems with normal activities

Early heart disease is barely noticeable, which is why it's important to maintain regular check-ups with your primary care physician. Contact your doctor if you experience any of the above.



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