

Exercise: easing into it

If you've decided to start an exercise program, well done! You should reap rewards in terms of physical and mental health. But there are a few pointers to consider to ensure that you get the most out of your program and that it stays on track.



Accommodate your health

Choose an exercise that accommodates your current health issues. If you have a diagnosed health issue, it is advisable that you consult with your doctor, an exercise physiologist or physiotherapist about this issue before you start, as they will ensure that your program meets your health needs.

Exercise goals

Almost any amount of exercise is better than doing none. But for optimal benefits, most people should aim to complete 30-60 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic exercise on most and preferably every day of the week. This could involve a combination of walking, jogging, swimming, cycling, dancing, aerobic exercise classes, etc.

Additionally, most people should undertake some strengthening exercises to help maintain their muscle mass and function. However, if you've not exercised for a while, this amount of exercise may be unrealistic, and you may need to gradually build up to these levels, and lesser amounts of exercise will still produce health benefits. Conversely, experienced exercisers who have been fit and active for many years may reap benefits from undertaking more strenuous exercise, although this is not recommended for the less fit who should start easy and build up gradually.

How much exercise?

There are different types of exercise, for example: aerobic, strength and flexibility. Each of these conveys slightly different health benefits. Additionally, the amounts of exercise you do can be defined according to the following:

Intensity - how hard you work during the exercise

Time - how long you continue an exercise session

Frequency - how often you do the exercise, e.g. how many sessions per week.

When you start an exercise program you should undertake your exercise at a lower intensity, for a shorter time, and perhaps less frequently, than you ultimately aim to be doing. This is because the exercise will be placing unfamiliar demands on your body, and you need to give your body time to gradually adapt to the exercise and improve its capabilities. As you improve you can increase your time and frequency. Whether you increase your intensity or not will depend upon your goals and the advice of your doctor, exercise physiologist or physiotherapist.

Start easy and build up gradually

If you are committed to exercise, then commit to patiently working towards your goals. If you are starting exercise to improve your health, consider exercise to be a dose of 'good medicine'.

If you have not been active for some time (a month or longer) start with short bouts of low-intensity exercise — a moderate-paced 20 minute walk, or an activity of equivalent effort. Then increase the dose of exercise by increasing the frequency while keeping the same duration (time) and intensity. For example, take a moderate-paced 20 minute walk four times a week rather than twice a week.

If you feel that your lifestyle just does not allow for frequent sessions, then consider building up the duration of each exercise session — slowly. Increasing your duration by 5 or 10 minutes each session lets you measure how your body is coping with the increased effort. If aches and pains that follow your exercise session are still present the next time you'd planned to exercise, postpone the session until another day. If you have pain that starts or gets worse when you exercise, see your doctor.

Be careful with increasing the intensity of your exercise, as this poses the greatest risk of causing a serious injury or health emergency. This risk is extremely low if you exercise at a moderate intensity and build up the frequency gradually and the duration slowly. If you increase the intensity, at the very least you may find the exercise uncomfortable, and you're likely to put yourself off activity if you feel exhausted or suffer from aches and pains because of what you have put yourself through.

If you are intent on increasing the intensity, consider why this is. For instance, if you are determined to do something as intense as jogging straight away, is it because you want to reinforce how motivated you are? Remember, it's not about motivation; it's about finding a way back into activity every time a roadblock interrupts you. Building up gradually gives your body time to improve and reduces the risk of you exceeding your capacity. Whereas attempting to do too much may result in you having to temporarily reduce your exercise to less than you were doing previously, which will hold back your progress.

Aim for moderate-intensity exercise

Most of the health benefits can be gained from moderate-intensity exercise, which is why it is emphasized by leading health authorities. Moderate-intensity exercise will increase the rate and depth of your breathing, but not to the point where carrying on a conversation is difficult (the 'talk test'). If you are puffing and panting then you have entered the realm of high intensity activity. This is not where beginners should be for some time.

What type of exercise should I do?

Exercise that uses the large muscles of your body is beneficial for your general health. Examples include walking, cycling, swimming, dancing and aqua aerobics. Some of these exercises, especially swimming, cycling and aqua aerobics, also build strength. Additionally, as we age we lose muscle mass. So if you are approaching 50 or older, consider some strength-specific exercise (e.g. weights, yoga or pilates), but be guided by your health or fitness professional.

You'll be far more likely to make exercise a regular part of your day if you choose an exercise that you enjoy. If you don't enjoy it, chances are you won't stay with it. Alternatively, consider how to make an activity more fun. Plenty of regular walkers enjoy the company of others while they walk and a good coffee afterwards. Consider cycling or bush-walking in a group.

Remember the talk test; however, if you are not breathing somewhat harder than at rest, chances are your activity is only light and the benefit is minimal. Activities that will likely fall into this category are doubles tennis, ten-pin bowling and table tennis. These are all enjoyable but may not deliver the health benefits or weight loss benefits you could be seeking.

Aim for a balanced exercise programme

For all-round fitness, include:

- aerobic exercise to increase the health and endurance capacity of your cardiovascular system (your 'stamina') — e.g. walking, swimming, cycling;
- flexibility exercises to increase the range of movement of your joints and to counteract the tightening and shortening of muscles and tendons that can happen with inactivity, ageing and immediately following strenuous exercise — e.g. stretches, yoga;
- strength exercises to increase the strength of your muscles (their ability to exert a force) — e.g. weight training, resistance exercises; and
- adequate rest.

To gain the most benefit from your exercise program it must be supported by healthy nutrition and appropriate rest. Without these your ability to improve will be compromised. If you are unsure about structuring an exercise program, consider hiring an exercise professional to advise you.

Remember to warm up and cool down

At the start of an exercise session, gradually increase the tempo of your chosen activity to the level you sustain for the session. At the end allow 5 minutes or more to gradually wind this tempo back. Stopping abruptly can result in dizziness. A cool-down period can prevent this, and will assist your muscles to recover from exercise. This is also the ideal time to stretch your muscles, helping restore them in preparation for your next exercise session.

Again, if it's some time since you have exercised and you are unsure about how to do this, it's best to seek professional advice.

No longer needing to coax yourself into exercise

Once you begin to miss exercise when your routine is interrupted, you are well on your way to being that regular exerciser you had planned to become.

How long before you gain the benefits of exercise?

If you undertake your program conscientiously, you are likely to feel some health benefits within 4-6 weeks. How long it will take you to reach your goals will depend on what they are and your condition when you start the program. Consider how long your lifestyle has been lacking in activity, contributing towards health problems, or both. If you have been sedentary or not paying adequate attention to your health for months or years, then it is not reasonable to expect that changing this will bring results quickly. It might take as long to achieve your health goals (e.g. weight loss) as it did to create the issue, but as you begin to feel some benefits within those early weeks, this should reinforce your motivation to stick with it.

Disclaimer: it is not possible to prescribe exercise that is suitable for all people. Exercise should be tailored for health, age and desired results. This article is intended to offer the reader general concepts only. For further advice you are advised to consult your health professional (GP, exercise physiologist or physiotherapist) or a fitness professional (fitness centre staff or personal trainer).

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References

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