

Fitness 101: The Absolute Beginner's Guide to Exercise

How to get started with an exercise program.

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You've decided it's time to start exercising. Congratulations! You've taken the first step on your way to a new and improved body and mind

"Exercise is the magic pill," says Michael R. Bracko, EdD, FACSM, chairman of the American College of Sports Medicine's Consumer Information Committee. "Exercise can literally cure diseases like some forms of heart disease. Exercise has been implicated in helping people prevent or recover from some forms of cancer. Exercise helps people with arthritis. Exercise helps people prevent and reverse depression."

And there's no arguing that exercise can help most people lose weight, as well as look more toned and trim.

Of course, there's a catch. You need to get -- and keep -- moving if you want to cash in on the benefits. This doesn't necessarily mean following a strict, time-consuming regimen at the gym -- although that can certainly reap benefits. The truth is you can get rewards from many different types and levels of exercise.

"Any little increment of physical activity is going to be a great boost to weight loss and feeling better," says Rita Redberg, MSc, chairwoman of the American Heart Association's Scientific Advisory Board for the Choose to Move program.

Your exercise options are numerous, including walking, dancing, gardening, biking -- even doing household chores, says Redberg. The important thing is to choose activities you enjoy, she says. That will increase your chances of making it a habit.

And how much exercise should you do? For heart health, the AHA recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity, such as walking, on most days of the week.

Yet "if you're getting less than that, you're still going to see benefits," says Redberg. "It's not like if you can't do 30 minutes, you shouldn't do anything, because you're definitely going to see benefits even at 5 or 10 minutes of moving around."

Ready to get started? Health and fitness experts helped WebMD compile this beginner's guide to exercise, including definitions of some common exercise terms, sample workouts, and recommendations on home exercise equipment.

A way to measure the intensity of your exercise is to check your heart rate or pulse during physical activity. These should be within a target range during different levels of intensity.

For example, according to the CDC, for moderate-intensity physical activity, a person's target heart rate should be 50% to 70% of his or her maximum heart rate.

Get Ready

The first step to any workout routine is to evaluate how fit you are for your chosen physical activity. Whenever you begin an exercise program, it's wise to consult a doctor. Anyone with major health risks, males aged 45 and older, and women aged 55 and older should get medical clearance, says Cedric Bryant, PhD, chief exercise physiologist for the American Council on Exercise.

But no matter what your medical condition, you can usually work out in some way.

"I can't think of any medical issue that would get worse from the right kind of exercise," says Stephanie Siegrist, MD, an orthopedic surgeon in private practice in Rochester, N.Y.

After assessing your fitness, it helps to set workout goals. For example, do you want to prepare to run a 5K? Hit the gym five times a week? Or just walk around the block without getting winded?

"Make sure the goals are clear, realistic, and concise," says Sal Fichera, an exercise physiologist and owner of New York-based Forza Fitness.

Whatever your goals and medical condition, approach any new exercise regimen with caution.

"Start low and go slow," advises Bryant. Many beginners make the mistake of starting out too aggressively, only to give up when they end up tired, sore, or injured, he says. Some get discouraged because they think an aggressive workout will produce instant results.

"Generally speaking, when people go about it too aggressively early in the program, they tend not to stick with it over the long haul," says Bryant. "What you really want to do is to develop some new habits that you can stick with for a lifetime."

Fitness Definitions

Even long-term exercisers may have misconceptions about exactly what some fitness terms mean. Here are some definitions of words and phrases you're likely to encounter:

- **Aerobic/cardiovascular activity.** These are exercises that are strenuous enough to temporarily speed up your breathing and heart rate. [Running](#), cycling, walking, [swimming](#), and dancing fall in this category.
- **Maximum Heart Rate** is based on the person's age. An estimate of a person's maximum age-related heart rate can be obtained by subtracting the person's age from 220.
- **Flexibility training or [stretching](#).** This type of workout enhances the range of motion of joints. Age and inactivity tend to cause muscles, tendons, and ligaments to shorten over time. Contrary to popular belief, however, stretching and warming up are not synonymous. In fact, stretching cold muscles and joints can make them prone to injury.
- **Strength, weight, or resistance training.** This type of exercise is aimed at improving the strength and function of muscles. Specific exercises are done to strengthen each muscle group. [Weight lifting](#) and exercising with stretchy resistance bands are examples of resistance training activities, as are exercises like pushups in which you work against the weight of your own body.
- **Set.** Usually used in discussing [strength training](#) exercises, this term refers to repeating the same exercise a certain number of times. For instance, a weight lifter may do 10 biceps curls, rest for a few moments, then perform another "set" of 10 more biceps curls.
- **Repetition or "rep."** This refers to the number of times you perform an exercise during a set. For example, the weight lifter mentioned above performed 10 reps of the bicep curl exercise in each set.
- **Warm up.** This is the act of preparing your body for the stress of exercise. The body can be warmed up with light intensity aerobic movements like walking slowly. These movements increase blood flow, which in turn heats up muscles and joints. "Think of it as a lube job for the body," Bryant explains. At the end of your warm-up, it's a good idea to do a little light stretching.
- **Cooldown.** This is the less-strenuous exercise you do to cool your body down after the more intense part of your workout. For example, after a walk on a treadmill, you might walk at a reduced speed and incline for several minutes until your breathing and heart rate slow down. Stretching is often part of a cooldown.

Sample Workouts for Beginners

Before beginning any fitness routine, it's important to warm up, then do some light stretching. Save the bulk of the stretching for after the workout.

Once you're warmed up, experts recommend three different types of exercise for overall physical fitness: cardiovascular activity, strength conditioning, and flexibility training. These don't all have to be done at once, but doing each on a regular basis will result in balanced fitness.

- **Cardiovascular activity.** Start by doing an aerobic activity, like walking or running, for a sustained 20-30 minutes, four to five times a week, says Bryant. To ensure you're working at an optimum level, try the "talk test": Make sure you can

- carry on a basic level of conversation without being too winded. But if you can easily sing a song, you're not working hard enough.
- **Strength conditioning.** Start by doing one set of exercises targeting each of the major muscle groups. Bryant suggests using a weight at which you can comfortably perform the exercise eight to 12 times in a set. When you think you can handle more, gradually increase either the weight, the number of repetitions, or number of sets. To maximize the benefits, do strength training at least twice a week. Never work the same body part two days in a row.
 - **Flexibility training.** The American College on Exercise recommends doing slow, sustained static stretches three to seven days per week. Each stretch should last 10-30 seconds.

To learn how to perform certain exercises, consider hiring a personal trainer for a session or two, or take advantage of free sessions offered when you join a gym.

Home Exercise Equipment

Exercise doesn't have to be done at the gym. You can work out in the comfort of your own home. And with calisthenic-type exercises such as squats, lunges, pushups, and sit-ups, you can use the resistance of your own weight to condition your body. To boost your strength and aerobic capacity, you may also want to invest in some home exercise equipment.

Experts offer their thoughts on some popular home exercise items:

- **Treadmill.** This best-selling piece of equipment is great for cardiovascular exercise, says Bracko. He recommends starting out walking at a low intensity for 30 minutes and applying the talk test. Depending on how you do, adjust the intensity, incline, and/or time accordingly.
- **Free weights.** Barbells and dumbbells make up this category of strength-training equipment. Dumbbells are recommended for beginners. Fichera suggests purchasing an 18 pound adjustable dumbbell set, which can be adjusted in 3 pound increments.
- **Other strength training equipment.** This includes weight stacks (plates with cables and pulleys), flexible bands, and flexible rods. Fichera says flexible bands are good for beginners, especially since they come with instructions. But he doesn't recommend them for long-term use; your muscles will likely adapt to the resistance and need more of a challenge.
- **Exercise ball.** Although instructions and/or a companion video can accompany this gadget, Bracko worries that beginners may use exercise balls improperly. "Some people fall off or can't keep the ball still," he says. But if you enjoy working out with an exercise ball, it can provide a good workout.
- **Exercise videos and DVDs.** Before working out with a home exercise video or DVD, Siegrist recommends watching through it at least once to observe the structure and proper form of the workout. To further improve form, she suggests

working out in front of a mirror, if possible, or having someone else watch you do the exercise.