

Physical Activity for Everyone: Getting Started

The victory is not always to the swift, but to those who keep moving.

So, you already know that regular physical activity can do great things for your health and well-being. And when you pair that with good nutrition, your body is sure to thank you! But isn't getting started the hardest part? Like any change in your life, knowing where you are and where you're going is important.



Have you ever noticed that what works for some people when they make a change in their life may not work for you? Most people move through a series of five stages of readiness as they change behaviors. What helps someone in one stage may not work for someone in another stage. Look at the graphic below to see where you fall in the stages of change.

Stages of Change in Adding Physical Activity Into Your Life- Where Are You?



These stages represent a spiral path to adopting regular physical activity into your life. Each stage takes a period of time to acquaint yourself with new behaviors.

Effort and commitment is needed in all stages. You will move through each stage as you are ready to change. The interesting part of this model is that it recognizes you may not always move forward in a straight line. There will be times when you lapse, going back to an earlier stage. Then the time will come when you are ready to advance forward. This is expected and part of the process of adopting new behaviors. You will progress when you are ready.

Physical Activity for Everyone: Getting Started: Stage 1 — Not Ready for Change

As the title suggests, you're not ready for change right now. You're not even thinking about adding physical activity into your daily routine. If you were thinking about it, you'd be planning to do something different than what you're doing today—little or nothing. You may have tried physical activity in the past, and not succeeded in adding it into your life. This is a good time to consider the pros, and then the cons, of becoming more active.

Pros-Wanting to Do This

Check off the benefits (pros) that you want to experience. Maybe you want to...

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Feel better in body, mind, and spirit.
- Shed extra pounds and abdominal fat.
- Live longer by reducing the risk of heart disease and diabetes.
- Look your best.
- Feel less tired and have more energy to get things done.
- Set a good example for your family.
- Sleep more soundly.
- Improve bone density, reducing the risk of osteoporosis and fractures as you get older.
- Reduce feelings of tension, stress, anxiety, and/or depression.
- Become stronger.
- Discover enjoyable new activities.
- Feel better about your body.
- Have fun.

What other reasons do you have for wanting to be more active?

Cons-What's Stopping You

Check off the following barriers (cons) that are holding you back. Maybe you...

- Don't know now how to find time in the day for physical activity.
- Are busy and stressed, and you don't want to take on another challenge.

- Want to spend your free time with your family and fear that a physical activity routine will interfere.
- Find physical activity boring.
- Think that you need to spend money on special equipment or health clubs to become more active.
- Have some lingering doubts about becoming more active.
- Don't like to sweat and you don't want to shower afterward.
- Don't know how to exercise.
- Are concerned about how you look while exercising or wearing exercise clothes.
- Don't want to check with a doctor to begin an activity program.
- Have aches and pains that keep you from physical activity.
- Are too old to start or learn how.
- Don't know anyone else who can join you.
- Had a bad experience with sports or exercise in the past.

What other barriers are holding you back?

Now that you've identified your pros and cons, where do you stand? *Which benefits are you most excited about? Which barriers do you feel strongest about? Often* when you see what items are most important, you will begin to shift your views about physical activity and decide that finding easy ways to add physical activity into your life is exactly what you want to do.

Do you see those barriers as something you want to explore, or are you satisfied in remaining inactive? If you have no desire to learn more about physical activity or you get upset when people mention it to you, you're not ready to consider easy ways to have more energy throughout the day. However, if you are open to learning more, you will find that working with the barriers you identified will help release you from your defenses.

Physical Activity for Everyone: Getting Started: Stage 2 — Thinking About Change

So, you are thinking about becoming physically active within the next six months! Imagining yourself involved in physical activity is the first step in adopting a healthier lifestyle. You assessed the benefits of engaging in physical activity, and you determined your barriers to success. Congratulations! You have taken some important steps, and now it is time to continue down the road to becoming more physically active.

Perhaps you're waiting for the magic moment to make some changes. Why not start now? Do you remember a time when you were physically active and felt great? Physical activity does not have to follow the old and incorrect maxim of "no pain, no gain." Physical activity can be fun! Can you imagine

taking a 15-minute walk on a beautiful day? Playing touch football with your kids in the backyard? You can do it! Remember, physical activity makes more energy than it takes, and taking just one of the following steps is all you need to get started.

Find the time

Figure out when you could possibly fit physical activity into your already busy schedule. You will find opportunities at home, work, and elsewhere (e.g., walking up and down the stairs for 15 minutes during your lunch break). What is important is discovering that you do have time in your schedule. All it takes is that first step. Remember, accumulating 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking) 5 or more days of the week is recommended.

Remember your physical activity successes and interests

Think about physical activities that you have enjoyed or that sound interesting. Were there times in your life when you played a sport on a regular basis? Are you interested in taking a physical activity class such as aerobic kickboxing, tennis, or fly-fishing? Consider activities that you can do alone (e.g., walking) or with a friend (e.g., tennis), and include indoor and outdoor activities. Some possibilities include the following: walking, yoga, low-impact aerobics, gardening/yard work, frisbee, volleyball, swimming, basketball, dancing, skating, biking, tennis, hiking, stair climbing, softball, and jogging. Keep a list by your phone at work or home and jot down new ideas as they come to mind.

Develop a support network

Not yet convinced that you can become more physically active? That's where the people you know can help you out. Discuss your concerns with peers, family, friends, or co-workers who are physically active. Find out how they got started and what keeps them motivated. They might have some great "tips for success" about how to incorporate moderate-intensity physical activity into your daily routine. Turn to them for ideas, motivation, and support. Work together to get started and keep you going. Name two people with whom you will talk to and seek support. Set dates within the month for your discussion with them.

Recall your current level of activity

Nobody knows you better than you do. In this case, knowing your current level of activity will help you decide where there is room for change. Consider the following questions to help you recall your current level of activity.

- How often do you participate in physical activity of at least moderate intensity?
- How active is your job?
- How active are you during lunch or breaks at work?
- What do you tend to do before or after work?
- What kind of activities do you do on a typical weekend or day off work?
- How often do you do active indoor chores such as scrubbing the tub, cleaning out the garage, painting, washing windows, working on the house, or carrying out heavy bags of trash or recyclable goods?
- How often do you do active outdoor chores such as mowing the grass, washing and waxing the car, gardening, heavy yard work, caring for large animals, or doing home repair?

Be honest with yourself. Choose one of the following areas in which you think you can make realistic changes.

- Work
- Lunch/break time
- Before/after work
- Weekends
- Active indoor chores
- Active outdoor chores

Set small, specific goals

Okay. You've thought about your favorite physical activities, chosen a support network, and identified one target area that you want to address in the next month. This information can help you set some achievable goals. For example, if you chose physical activity at work as the target area you want to address this month, a specific goal might be to use the stairs instead of the elevator at least twice a week. This is always better than a general approach such as, "I will be more active this month." By starting small and increasing your goals at a pace that feels right for you, all the benefits of physical activity can be yours. And, if you have some setbacks, that's okay. Accept that lapses happen and begin again. You will achieve success.

It is also important to build on your goals. For example, if you are successfully walking once a week as your specific goal, after several weeks add an additional day. Now you'll be walking twice a week. The following month increase the number of days per week and the amount of time you walk. Also, add another activity such as cycling or gardening on the weekends.

Reward yourself

You deserve a medal! Once you've set and achieved some specific goals, celebrate your successes—no matter how small. You might choose a reward that is related to physical activity. How about workout clothing or new athletic shoes? Or reward yourself with a trip to the movies or tickets to your favorite play or sporting event.

Develop long-term vision

Keep in mind that health professionals recommend 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (e.g., gardening or walking) a day at least five days a week. This can be your long-term goal, but for now just keep building on your successes month by month.

Physical Activity for Everyone: Getting Started: Stage 3 — Preparing for Action

Whether you've decided to start being physically active now or you would like to be physically active on a more consistent basis, congratulations! You have taken an important step by focusing on future goals. Now, it's time to take action.

Do you remember a time when you were physically active and felt great? You can feel that way again. Simply make a commitment to incorporate moderate-intensity physical activity into your lifestyle, slowly but surely. For instance, this could mean riding your bike to the local market to pick up a few items for dinner. The following steps will provide you with the tools you need to develop a plan of action to meet your goals. You can do it!

Develop support

Share your commitment to becoming physically active with those around you. When seeking the support of others, help them understand your reasons for change so they can help you. Make use of the support networks that exist around you, such as friends or co-workers who are willing to help you remain motivated. Find friends, co-workers or family who will join you for evening walks. Gather a group for a weekend hike and picnic. Name two people who you will rely on for support and motivation

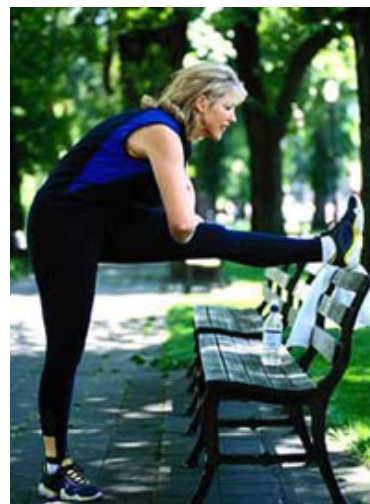
Getting ready for physical activity can also mean changing your surrounding (e.g., home, work, and car) to support your goals. Keep comfortable walking shoes at work or in the car. Have an exercise bag packed and ready to go. Post motivating messages in your day planner or on your bathroom mirror.

Name two ways you would like to alter your environment to support your goals.

Find the time

With some creative thinking, you'll find ways to squeeze a little more time out of your busy schedule. Adding short bouts of physical activity throughout the day really works. Walk down the hall instead of using the telephone or e-mail. Park farther from the door. Could you get up earlier to take a brisk walk? Climb up and down the stairs for 20 minutes during lunch?

Think about your schedule at work, home, and elsewhere. Find at least three slots that you could devote to physical activity during the next week, and write them down.



Make change a priority

Perhaps you've already made small changes in your level of activity that you can build on, or maybe you will be starting fresh. Either way, adding physical activity into your lifestyle is now at the top of your priority list. You can be confident that you are on the road to success. Choose one area of your life (e.g., work, lunch/break time, before/after work, weekends, active indoor chores, active outdoor chores) that you want to address in the next week.

Create a plan of action

You've developed a strong support network, found three time slots for physical activity, and chosen one area of your life that you want to address in the next week. The next step is to set some achievable goals and create a plan of action. For example, if you chose physical activity after work as the area to work on for the week, a specific goal might be walking the dog after work 4 days a week. Consider the plan developed by John, who makes his living as an aerospace engineer...

I wanted to look better and was ready to make some changes to allow for physical activity. I did not know where to start, so I started small. My first goal was to be physically active in the workplace three days a week. In the morning, I'd walk to the cafeteria for coffee instead of using the vending machine near my desk. Throughout the workday whenever I wanted more coffee or a bite to eat, I would take the stairs to the basement instead of using the snack shop outside of my office. The changes were fairly simple to make. By the end of six months, I worked up to brisk walking during my lunch break five days a week and taking the stairs to get coffee or snacks. I've been able to maintain a healthier weight and I feel good. Without heroic measures, I have made significant progress."

Now it's your turn! Choose four physical activity goals that you hope to accomplish within the next month.

Monitor your progress

Keep in mind that occasional setbacks do not mean failure. On the contrary, you have set and achieved some specific goals. However, it is important to plan for events that might disrupt your physical activity routine. For example, if you know it will rain all week, rent a physical activity video to use in your home. Right now, make a list of potential setbacks to your routine and how you will overcome them.

It is also important to monitor your progress. Self-monitoring can help you meet your goals by increasing your awareness of the changes you have or have not made. It is also important to build on your goals. For example, if your first weekly goal is to walk to dog 30 minutes twice a week, build on this goal the following week. So, by the end of week 2, your goal will be to walk the dog 30 minutes twice a week plus gardening on Sundays. Try keeping an activity log for your daily activity.

Reward yourself

You deserve a medal! You set and achieved some specific goals. Reward yourself with a gift. Here are some ideas: a health club membership, tickets to a sporting event, a massage, a new CD, or a sitter for the kids.

Use long-term vision

Keep in mind as you are progressing that health professionals recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity at least 5 days per week. This can be your long-term goal, but for now, just keep building on your successes week by week.

Physical Activity for Everyone: Getting Started: Stage 4 — Taking Action

At this stage, you've been busy the last few months planning and becoming physically active on a regular basis. You have made important decisions and are working to make changes in your life. Way to go! A large part of your plan is in action and you are making physical activity an important part of your life.



By including regular physical activity in your schedule each week, you've shown a commitment to yourself and your health. Are you enjoying the rewards of added energy and a newfound sense of well-being? You've taken old habits and replaced them with healthy actions. The benefits you identified earlier when considering "pros and cons" probably outweigh the barriers. You can be proud of your success—you're making progress! The following steps will support you in reaching your activity goals and will keep you on the right track.

Create balance in your life

Any change is difficult and recently you've added regular physical activity into your life. In doing that, you've taken time away from other things in your busy schedule. Your energy level is increasing but you can't be a super being and do everything. Creating balance in your life is important.

Review the activities in your busy schedule. Protecting your commitment to become physically active is important. Here are some helpful tips.

- Be realistic. Gradually adding moderate-intensity physical activity to your life will give you added energy. Don't overdo. You put yourself at risk for injury if you increase too much, too fast.

- Select a menu approach to adding additional activities. Think about activities that you have wanted to do in the past and include them in future plans. Vary your routine to help keep boredom away. Have fun.
- Replace bad thoughts with good ones. When you hear yourself saying, "I should be better (or faster) at this by now," counter back by saying, "I have made some real improvements and am right where I need to be."

Support yourself in thoughts and action

Surround yourself with people who support your new, active lifestyle. Not all of your family members, friends, or co-workers may want you to succeed in becoming more active. You will develop new habits that might not include them and that may be a problem. Remember the stages of change. Your path will be different from theirs. Visualize your response to a non-supportive friend who discourages you from wanting to be something different-more energetic and healthy. Be assertive in your response.

Some people find supportive messages surrounding them very helpful. Leave encouraging notes to yourself or "to-do lists" at home, in the car or at the office. A message in the car that reminds you to part farther away from the grocery store will give you an opportunity to walk a few extra minutes.

Can you find ways to make it easier to add activity into your day? Leaving an extra pair of walking shoes at the office or in your car would be one way. Your dog only has to walk around the block once to believe you will walk him every day at that same time. How can you say no to your favorite pet, even if you grumble the entire time? You'll soon find yourself looking forward to the time...you really will. What are two supportive actions you can take to maintain or enhance your current level of physical activity?

Pat on the back

Give yourself a big pat on the back for becoming physically active. You are making great strides in adding health benefits and strength to your life. Build in rewards to maintain your motivation. These can be setting goals for yourself or something you can get your hands on, such as a new pair of walking shoes. What would motivate you?

Review long-term vision

You may want to contract with yourself to reach certain goals. What are your long-range (one year or longer) goals for physical activity? List three short-term (three to six months) goals that will help you reach your long-range goal. Be specific.

Utilize your support network

Maintain a buddy system. Knowing you can ask a co-worker or family member for support is helpful. Mentors are important in the work setting. They help you make the right decisions and show you the ropes.

Do you know someone who would make a good mentor or buddy in maintaining or increasing your current activity patterns? What type of support and feedback do you need from your friends or mentor to be successful?

Plan for setbacks

Think about times when you will be tempted not to be active (e.g., added demands of work and family, the flu, a blizzard, or out-of-town visitors). List for yourself any events that have gotten in the way so far.

Accept that these lapses will happen. It does not mean that you have failed or will not get back into your regular habit. Be aware that during the first six months of any behavior change, you are at risk of reverting to old habits. Lapses are a normal part of the change process. If you plan and prepare for events that are likely to happen, you can prepare to hurdle over them as well. You've heard the term, "jump back in the saddle again." If you do lapse, just start right back where you left off. You'll thank yourself afterwards.

Physical Activity for Everyone: Getting Started: Stage 5 — Maintaining a Good Thing

Regular physical activity has become a part of who you are. You have kept the commitment to include activity in your everyday life and are a source of encouragement to others. The benefits of good health are important to you. The steps you've taken have been major and now you are physically active on 5 or more days of the week. Congratulations!

Look back to when you first started to become physically active. Do you remember some of your early struggles? You made the decision to overcome the barriers and succeeded in finding ways to increase your energy level and physical skills. One of the most important steps in maintaining your current success is anticipating minor slips.



Threats to success

It may be difficult for you to imagine a time when you will not want to continue regular physical activity. Repeat this next sentence three times (out loud and with feeling). "Minor slips will happen."

The greatest threat for relapse is overconfidence or believing it won't happen to you. It will happen and you have to plan for it. List two situations where you may be tempted to stop your regular activity, if only for a few days (e.g., vacation, a bout of flu, demands of work and family).

It's important to plan how you will handle these interruptions in your daily routine. If you know they will happen, you can plan around them. What can you do to reschedule physical activity during one of the situations you listed?

You have special friends and co-workers who have been encouraging you. Often as your activity level increases and becomes routine, this support stops. Because you're doing so well and exercise now is part of who you are, your friends may not believe you need the extra encouragement. Re-examine what you need from them and ask them to help you again. They can be the first ones to see old behaviors coming back. Ask them for continued feedback.

Tell-tale signs of danger

"I've got nothing to worry about."

"I'll never be a couch potato again."

"Nothing will stop me from including physical activity into my day."

"I'm safe. My friends or family won't let me quit."

"I've only missed a few days and will start back soon."

Have you heard yourself say any of the above sentences? These are signs that you may be in danger of overconfidence. Old habits die hard. Watch for times when temporary lapses lead to disappointment or giving up. That old couch will be calling you and reminding you of its comfort and support for your weary bones. What will you say back? Remember how hard it was in the beginning. Keeping up your commitment to physical activity today is as important as it was when you started.

Keep your balance

Just as you planned how to remove your barriers to physical activity months or years ago, it's time for you to do so again. Review the benefits and barriers from when you assessed the "pros and cons" earlier. How have your barriers changed from when you started becoming physically active? What are some of the things you can put around your home or office to reinforce your efforts? What are some of the things you can remove that contribute any threat to your activity? List two plans of action you can take to support your continued goals.

Maintain self-confidence

You have a sense of confidence that regular physical activity brings into your life. You have more energy and are also adding health benefits such as reducing the risk of developing or dying from some of the leading causes of illness and death. Maintaining this sense of well-being is important. When you are confident that you will continue to remain physically active, your success rate goes up.

How confident are you of participating in regular physical activity under the following conditions:

- When you are tired?
- When you are in a bad mood?
- When you feel you don't have time?
- When you are on vacation?
- When it is raining or snowing?

Mentor others

Look back at how others helped you adopt new behaviors. Their support and encouragement may have made a difference in your efforts. Did someone offer to show you the ropes or share a new technique that worked for you? It's time you become part of the buddy system but on the other end. You have made progress through the transition of adding regular physical activity into your life. It's been both hard and rewarding, even fun on most days. Share your skills with someone else. *Having others depend on you will increase your likelihood of continued success.* Being a role model will bring good feelings from helping others and will reinforce your motivation to stay with your active lifestyle.

Physical Activity for Everyone: Getting Started: When is a medical evaluation necessary?

Experts advise that people with chronic diseases, such as a heart condition, arthritis, diabetes, or high blood pressure, should talk to their doctor about what types and amounts of physical activity are appropriate. If you have a chronic disease and have not already done so, talk to your doctor before beginning a new physical activity program.

If you have symptoms that could be due to a chronic disease, you should have these symptoms evaluated, whether you are active or inactive. If you plan to start a new activity program, take the opportunity to get these symptoms evaluated. Symptoms of particular importance to evaluate include chest pain (especially chest pain that is brought on by exertion), loss of balance (especially loss of balance leading to a fall), dizziness, and passing out (loss of consciousness).

References

Information in the "Getting Started" section was adapted from:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention & Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research. *Personal energy plan-physical activity: steps for adding PEP to your life*. Dallas: Cooper Institute; 1999. To order a printed copy, contact 800-635-7050, x-3230 or E-mail: bshp@cooperinst.org.