

Now that you're on the path to a new, healthier you, here are five simple steps to get moving!

Starting a fitness program may be one of the best things you can do for your health. Physical activity reduces your risk of chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and more. Additionally, moderate and consistent exercise can improve your balance and coordination, help you sleep better, manage your weight and improve your self-esteem. You can get started in just five simple steps. Be sure to consult your physician before you initiate any fitness regimen.

Step 1: Determine your level of fitness

You probably have some idea of how fit you are. But assessing and recording baseline fitness scores can give you benchmarks against which to measure your progress. To assess your aerobic and muscular fitness, flexibility and body composition, consider recording:

- Your pulse before and after you walk 1 mile
- How long it takes you to walk 1 mile
- How many push-ups you can do in one session
- How many sit-ups you can do at one sitting
- How far you can reach forward while seated on the floor with your legs extended in front

Step 2: Design your fitness program

It's easy to say that you'll exercise every day. But you'll need a plan. As you design your fitness program, keep these points in mind:

- **Know yourself:** Are you starting a fitness program to help lose weight? Or do you have another motivation, such as preparing for a marathon? Having clear goals can help you gauge your progress. Also, know the type of environment in which you perform your best. Some people love the gym or group fitness environment while others prefer to 'walk alone' or use video workouts.
- **Set your goal:** Most adults should aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity — or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity — a week. In addition, adults also need two or more days of strength training a week.
- **Ease in:** Work with your physician to gauge at what level to start. Then, gradually increase your exercise intensity, strength and endurance. Start cautiously and progress slowly. If you have an injury or a medical condition, consult your physician or a physical therapist for help designing a fitness program that best suits your needs
- **Book it!:** Finding time to exercise can be a challenge – it's the main reason people avoid exercise. Truth is, you just need to prioritize and schedule it. That's right, we suggest you schedule time to exercise as you would any other appointment. Other ideas include watching your favorite show while walking on the treadmill, read while riding a stationary bike, or listen to books on your digital audio device while walking outdoors. A great song list can really help pass the time during a strength training workout.

- **Crosstrain:** To keep you and your muscles from getting bored, change it up! (Cross-training also reduces your chances of injuring or overusing one specific muscle or joint.) Plan to alternate among activities that emphasize different parts of your body, such as walking, swimming, strength training and yoga.
- **Pace yourself:** Many people start an exercise program in a frenzy — working out too long or too intensely — and give up when their muscles and joints become sore or injured. Alternate cardio and strength training to build muscle mass, not injure it. Rest and recovery are essential.
- **Share it:** Tell your exercise plan to friends and family. Ask them to assist with your motivation and keep you going. But this plan goes both ways...don't get upset with your loved ones when they try to motivate you. Also, a shared, written plan can also encourage you to stay on track. When you share any exercise goals, you're more likely to stick with it.

Step 3: Prepare your equipment

If you're planning to join a gym facility, this step is easy. Visit more than one establishment and find your best fit. If you're interested in exercise classes, make sure their schedule works for you. Ask about their busy times and determine if it matches your schedule. Also, many gyms include one or two personal training sessions to get you acquainted with the machines or the types of exercises you should expect in a class.

Fitness videos are also another popular way to fit exercise into your daily life without leaving home. Choose videos that provide exercise at your level, not too far above, as injury may occur. Consider trying something new...who knows, you just might love Zumba™. You may also need new athletic shoes. Be sure to pick shoes designed for the activity you have in mind.

If you're planning to invest in exercise equipment, choose something that's practical, enjoyable and easy to use. Consider checking out certain types of equipment at a fitness center before investing in your own equipment. To stretch your exercise dollars, consider buying used equipment – most often you'll get very good quality for the money.

Step 4: Get started

Now you're ready for action. As you begin your fitness program, keep these tips in mind:

- **Easy does it:** Give yourself plenty of time to warm up and cool down with easy walking or gentle stretching. Then speed up to a pace you can continue for five to 10 minutes without getting overly tired. As your stamina improves, gradually increase the amount of time you exercise. Work your way up to 30 to 60 minutes of exercise most days of the week.
- **Work out in small doses:** You don't have to do all your exercise at one time. Shorter but more-frequent sessions have aerobic benefits, too. Fifteen minutes of exercise a couple of times a day may fit into your schedule better than a single 30-minute session.
- **Get your creative juices flowing:** Maybe your workout routine includes various activities, such as walking, bicycling or rowing. But don't stop there. Take a weekend hike with your family or spend an evening ballroom dancing.
- **Honor your body.** If you feel pain, shortness of breath, dizziness or nausea, you may be pushing yourself too hard. Be sure to notify your physician if any concerning symptoms occur.
- **Be flexible.** If you're really overwhelmed or too sore, give yourself permission to take a day or two off. Just know that you'll start back right where you left off.

Step 5: Monitor your progress

Repeat your personal fitness assessment six weeks after you start your program and then again every three to six months. You may notice that you need to increase the amount of time you exercise or increase the amount of weight you work with in order to continue improving. Or you may be pleasantly surprised to find that you're exercising just the right amount to meet your fitness goals.

If you lose motivation, set new goals or try a new activity. Exercising with a friend or taking a class at a fitness center may be just what it takes.

Starting an exercise program is an important decision. But it doesn't have to be an overwhelming one. By planning carefully and pacing yourself, you can establish a healthy habit that lasts a lifetime.