



The Wonderful World of Physical Fitness

Exercise: Benefits of regular physical activity

The merits of exercise — from preventing chronic health conditions to boosting confidence and self-esteem — are hard to ignore. And the benefits are yours for the taking, regardless of age, sex or physical ability. Need more convincing? Check out seven specific ways exercise can improve your life.

1. Exercise improves your mood.

Need to blow off some steam after a stressful day? A workout at the gym or a brisk 30-minute walk can help you calm down.

Exercise stimulates various brain chemicals, which may leave you feeling happier and more relaxed than you were before you worked out. You'll also look better and feel better when you exercise regularly, which can boost your confidence and improve your self-esteem. Exercise even reduces feelings of depression and anxiety.

2. Exercise combats chronic diseases.

Worried about heart disease? Hoping to prevent osteoporosis? Regular exercise might be the ticket.

Regular exercise can help you prevent — or manage — high blood pressure. Your cholesterol will benefit, too. Regular exercise boosts high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or "good," cholesterol while decreasing low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad," cholesterol. This one-two punch keeps your blood flowing smoothly by lowering the buildup of plaques in your arteries.

And there's more. Regular exercise can help you prevent type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and certain types of cancer.

3. Exercise helps you manage your weight.

Want to drop those excess pounds? Trade some couch time for walking or other physical activities.

This one's a no-brainer. When you exercise, you burn calories. The more intensely you exercise, the more calories you burn — and the easier it is to keep your weight under control. You don't even need to set aside major chunks of time for working out. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Walk during your lunch break. Do jumping jacks during commercials. Better yet, turn off the TV and take a brisk walk. Dedicated workouts are great, but activity you accumulate throughout the day helps you burn calories, too.

4. Exercise strengthens your heart and lungs.

Winded by grocery shopping or household chores? Don't throw in the towel. Regular exercise can leave you breathing easier.

Exercise delivers oxygen and nutrients to your tissues. In fact, regular exercise helps your entire cardiovascular system — the circulation of blood through your heart and blood vessels — work more efficiently. Big deal? You bet! When your heart and lungs work more efficiently, you'll have more energy to do the things you enjoy.

5. Exercise promotes better sleep.

Struggling to fall asleep? Or stay asleep? It might help to boost your physical activity during the day.

A good night's sleep can improve your concentration, productivity and mood. And, you guessed it; exercise is sometimes the key to better sleep. Regular exercise can help you fall asleep faster and deepen your sleep. The timing is up to you — but if you're having trouble sleeping, you might want to try late afternoon workouts. The natural dip in body temperature five to six hours after you exercise might help you fall asleep.

6. Exercise can put the spark back into your sex life.

Are you too tired to have sex? Or feeling too out of shape to enjoy physical intimacy? Exercise to the rescue.

Regular exercise can leave you feeling energized and looking better, which may have a positive effect on your sex life. But there's more to it than that. Exercise improves your circulation, which can lead to more satisfying sex.

7. Exercise can be — gasp — fun!

Wondering what to do on a Saturday afternoon? Looking for an activity that suits the entire family? Get physical!

Exercise doesn't have to be drudgery. Take a ballroom dancing class. Check out a local climbing wall or hiking trail. Push your kids on the swings or climb with them on the jungle gym. Plan a neighborhood kickball or touch football game. Find an activity you enjoy, and go for it. If you get bored, try something new. If you're moving, it counts!

Are you convinced? Good. Start reaping the benefits of physical activity today!