

EXERCISE TO PREVENT HEART DISEASE



Heart disease is the main cause of death in the western world. Compared to active people, people who get no physical exercise are twice as likely to suffer a heart attack, and are three times more likely to die immediately after it occurs.

Your heart is a muscle and it gets stronger and healthier if you lead an active life. Regular exercise can prevent or delay the onset of heart disease and other conditions. It helps improve the function of the heart and it helps to make positive changes in body weight, fat and metabolism.

How keeping fit can prevent heart disease

Cardiovascular disease – which in general refers to any condition that involves the heart and blood vessels – is a growing, global threat. Cardiovascular disease is already the number one cause of mortality in the western world. It is becoming more common in South Africa as traditional societies adopt a more Western diet and lifestyle.

Experts agree that three risk factors, namely smoking, poor nutritional habits and a lack of physical activity contribute greatly to the four chronic diseases that are responsible for over 50% of deaths worldwide:

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Chronic respiratory disease
- Cancer

Exercise reduces disease risks

Getting active and fit has been shown to decrease the risk of — and manage — many lifestyle diseases (which are also risk factors for heart disease). Studies prove that even a moderate level of regular exercise can:

- Improve insulin sensitivity thereby reducing the risk of type 2 diabetes
- Increase good cholesterol (HDL) and decrease bad cholesterol (LDL)
- Reduce the risk of atherosclerosis, the build-up of plaque (fatty substances) in our arteries
- Lower the risk of high blood pressure (hypertension)
- Improve blood circulation, lowering the risk of stroke
- Strengthen the immune system, lowering susceptibility to illnesses like the common cold
- Help us “bounce back” quicker after being sick
- Lower the incidence of certain types of cancers, including breast cancer

Getting off to a safe start

It is important to get a medical assessment before starting any exercise programme. This is especially important for:

- Men over the age of 45
- Women over the age of 55
- Pregnant women
- People who are still recovering from illness or injury
- People who are obese
- People who smoke

Anyone who has, or has a family history of:

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure

Exercise helps with weight management

Maintaining a healthy body weight involves balancing your energy intake from food with your energy output through exercise. We start losing fat when we spend more energy than we consume. So, the best way to tip this equation to lose weight is to reduce the “energy in” by consuming fewer kilojoules and increase “energy out” through exercise.

Exercise is an effective stress buster

Exercising provides a “time out” from the stresses of daily living. The reason is chemical: when we exercise, our body secretes hormones called endorphins that help improve our mood. We also secrete other hormones that help us control stress and anxiety — norepinephrine, dopamine and serotonin — in higher amounts during exercise. Regular physical activity is also a proven intervention to ease the symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Exercise helps you sleep better

People who exercise regularly fall asleep quicker, sleep better and feel less tired during the day than those who do not.



Best exercise for heart health

Research shows that 30 minutes to 60 minutes of moderate intensity training a day has tremendous health benefits. Think of what 30 minutes really is in relation to the rest of your 24-hour day. Ask yourself if you can spare that amount of time if it meant:

- Greater agility and energy for everyday tasks
- Lower healthcare costs
- A longer, healthier life.

According to WebMD, a good exercise plan for heart health should include:

- Aerobic exercise ("cardio"): Running, jogging and cycling are some examples. You must be moving fast enough to raise your heart rate and breathe harder, but you should still be able to talk to someone while you are doing it. Otherwise, you are pushing too hard. If you have joint problems, choose a low-impact activity, like swimming or walking.
- Stretching: You will become more flexible if you do this a couple of times a week. Stretch after you have warmed up or finished exercising. Stretch gently — it should not hurt.
- Strength training. You can use weights, resistance bands, or your own body weight (like in yoga) for this. Do it two to three times a week. Let your muscles recover for a day between sessions.