

Aerobic exercise

Aerobic exercise is when the body uses oxygen while producing energy for physical activity. 'Aerobic' means 'with oxygen'. Aerobic metabolism occurs when the body breaks down fat and glucose by combining with oxygen. During intense aerobic exercise, the body uses more oxygen, and breathing and heart rate increase. Over time, regular aerobic exercise will improve a person's health and fitness and reduce levels of body fat. Regular physical activity reduces the incidence of cardiovascular disease and helps to prevent diabetes, injury and some forms of cancer, as well as positively influencing mental and social health and wellbeing.

The great news about exercising is that it doesn't have to be strenuous or vigorous. Moderate intensity activities (activity that is energetic, but at a level at which a conversation can be maintained), such as walking and cycling, are enough for you to gain health benefits.

People who are able and wish to participate in more vigorous activity (for example aerobics, netball or touch football) are encouraged to continue to do so, as these activities may provide additional benefits in terms of cardiovascular health.

How often and for how long?

The Heart Foundation and other leading authorities recommend that people include at least 30 minutes or more of moderate intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking) on most, if not all, days of the week. The 30 minutes can be accumulated in shorter bouts, such as three 10-minute walks.

There are also many convenient opportunities to be active throughout our normal daily routine, such as walking to and from work when buying your lunch or walking children to school.

Four easy steps to help you stay active and healthy

To help you make physical activity an important part of your day, some national guidelines have been developed. The guidelines refer to the minimum levels of physical activity required for good health. They are not intended for high level fitness or sports training. Try to carry out all guidelines and, for best results, combine an active lifestyle with healthy eating.

1. Think of movement as an opportunity, not an inconvenience

Try to see any form of movement of the body as an opportunity to improve your health, not as a time-wasting inconvenience.

2. Be active every day in as many ways as you can

Make a habit of walking or cycling instead of using the car or do things yourself instead of using labour-saving machines.

3. Put together at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most (preferably all) days

Moderate intensity activity includes such things as a brisk walk or cycling. The 30 minutes need not be continuous. Combine short sessions of different activities of around 10 to 15 minutes each.

4. If you can, add some vigorous exercise for extra health and fitness

Vigorous exercise makes you 'huff and puff'. For extra health and fitness, add 30 minutes of vigorous exercise to your daily half-hour of moderate exercise on three to four days of the week.

Physical benefits of regular exercise

Being physically active on a regular basis will promote a range of health benefits, including:

- Reduced likelihood of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers
- Strengthened heart and cardiovascular system
- Increased muscle strength
- Stronger bones, especially if the activity is weight bearing
- Improved stamina
- Lowered blood cholesterol levels
- Reduced blood pressure
- Loss of excess body fat.

An effective treatment for depression

Studies have shown that regular exercise can be used in isolation or in combination with other therapies to treat some forms of depression and anxiety. Even people who don't suffer from depression feel happier and more relaxed with regular exercise.

Types of aerobic exercise

Exercise is aerobic if it is performed continuously. Around 20 to 30 minutes is a sufficient amount of time to gain health benefits. Whatever you choose to do, it should be something you enjoy. Different forms of aerobic exercise include:

- Walking, jogging or running
- Swimming
- Dancing
- Aerobics classes and water aerobics classes
- Cycling
- Skating
- Line dancing
- Ballroom dancing.

See your doctor first

If you are over 40 years, haven't exercised regularly for a long time or you have a pre-existing medical condition (or if you have any other concerns), you should consult with your doctor before you start a new exercise program.

See over...

Beginning an exercise program

Tips on starting and maintaining regular exercise include:

- Choose an activity that you like, or else your enthusiasm will wane.
- Vary your program to prevent boredom.
- Try exercising with a friend to add an enjoyable social element to your program.
- Start gently let your body be your guide on intensity.
- Warm up thoroughly before you start, by going through the motions of the activity to increase blood flow to the required muscles.
- Start off with short sessions until your fitness improves. Multiple smaller bouts of 10 minutes will bring benefits and it's fine to start with even shorter sessions and gradually build up if you haven't exercised for a while.
- Start gently and progress gradually. If you are overly fatigued, miss a day and take a rest, but remember a key to health is regular physical activity.
- 'Warm down' after exercise with easy stretches to let your body 'come down' slowly.
- Instead of trying to exercise through an injury, give it time to heal.

Anaerobic exercise

The body has another energy system the anaerobic energy system which it relies on during brief periods of high intensity activity. 'Anaerobic' means 'without oxygen'. The body relies on its anaerobic metabolism for activities like lifting heavy weights or sprinting.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Exercise physiologists
- Qualified physical education teachers
- Qualified sports coaches.

Things to remember

- Aerobic exercise is any form of activity that uses oxygen in the production of energy.
- For an activity to be aerobic, it needs to involve large muscle groups, rhythmically, over a period of time.
- If you are over 40 years, haven't exercised regularly for a long time or you have a pre-existing medical condition (or if you have any other concerns), you should consult with your doctor before you start a new exercise program.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by the National Heart Foundation. The Better Health Channel is part of the Department of Human Services, Victoria

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