

How to Start Exercising and Stick to It

Making Exercise an Enjoyable Part of Your Everyday Life



You already know there are many great reasons to exercise—from improving energy, mood, sleep, and health to reducing anxiety, stress, and depression. And detailed exercise instructions and workout plans are just a click away. But if knowing how and why to exercise was enough, we'd all be in shape. Making exercise a habit takes more—you need the right mindset and a smart approach. Whatever your age or fitness level—even if you've never exercised a day in your life—there are steps you can take to make exercise less intimidating and painful and more fun and instinctive.

What's keeping you from exercising?

If you're having trouble beginning an exercise plan or following through, you're not alone. Many of us struggle getting out of the sedentary rut, despite our best intentions.

While practical concerns like a busy schedule or poor health can make exercise more challenging, for most of us, the biggest barriers are mental. Maybe it's a lack of self-confidence that keeps you from taking positive steps, or your motivation quickly flames out, or you get easily discouraged and give up. We've all been there at some point. Here's what you can do to break through mental barriers:

Ditch the all-or-nothing attitude. You don't have to spend hours in a gym or force yourself into monotonous or painful activities you hate to experience the physical and emotional benefits of exercise. A little exercise is better than nothing. In fact, adding just modest amounts of physical activity to your weekly routine can have a profound effect on your mental and emotional health.

Be kind to yourself. Research shows that self-compassion increases the likelihood that you'll succeed in any given endeavor. So, don't beat yourself up about your body, your

current fitness level, or your supposed lack of willpower. All that will do is demotivate you. Instead, look at your past mistakes and unhealthy choices as opportunities to learn and grow.

Check your expectations. You didn't get out of shape overnight, and you're not going to instantly transform your body either. Expecting too much, too soon only leads to frustration. Try not to be discouraged by what you can't accomplish or how far you have to go to reach your fitness goals. Instead of obsessing over results, focus on consistency. While the improvements in mood and energy levels may happen quickly, the physical payoff will come in time.

Busting the biggest exercise excuses

Making excuses for not exercising? Whether it's lack of time or energy, or fear of the gym, there are solutions.

"I hate exercising."

Many of us feel the same. If sweating in a gym or pounding a treadmill isn't your idea of a great time, try to find an activity that you do enjoy—such as dancing—or pair physical activity with something more enjoyable. Take a walk at lunchtime through a scenic park, for example, walk laps of an air-conditioned mall while window shopping, walk, run, or bike with a friend, or listen to your favorite music while you move.

"I'm too busy."

Even the busiest of us can find free time in our day for activities that are important. It's your decision to make exercise a priority. And don't think you need a full hour for a good workout. Short 5-, 10-, or 15-minute bursts of activity can prove very effective—so, too, can squeezing all your exercise into a couple of sessions over the weekend. If you're too busy during the week, get up and get moving during the weekend when you have more time.

"I'm too tired."

It may sound counterintuitive, but physical activity is a powerful pick-me-up that actually reduces fatigue and boosts energy levels in the long run. With regular exercise, you'll feel much more energized, refreshed, and alert at all times.

"I'm too fat," "I'm too old," or "My health isn't good enough."

It's never too late to start building your strength and physical fitness, even if you're a senior or a self-confessed couch potato who has never exercised before. Very few health or weight problems rule exercise out of the question, so talk to your doctor about a safe routine.

“Exercise is too difficult and painful.”

“No pain, no gain” is an outdated way of thinking about exercise. Exercise shouldn’t hurt. And you don’t have to push yourself until you’re soaked in sweat or every muscle aches to get results. You can build your strength and fitness by walking, swimming, or even playing golf, gardening, or cleaning the house.

“I’m not athletic.”

Still have nightmares from PE? You don’t have to be sporty or ultra-coordinated to get fit. Focus on easy ways to boost your activity level, like walking, swimming, or even working more around the house. Anything that gets you moving will work.

How much exercise do you need?

The key thing to remember about starting an exercise program is that something is always better than nothing. Going for a quick walk is better than sitting on the couch; one minute of activity will help you lose more weight than no activity at all. That said, the current recommendations for most adults is to reach at least 150 minutes of moderate activity per week. You’ll get there by exercising for 30 minutes, 5 times a week. Can’t find 30 minutes in your busy schedule? It’s okay to break things up. Two 15-minute workouts or three 10-minute workouts can be just as effective. And a recent study in the UK found that squeezing a week’s worth of activity into one or two weekend sessions can benefit your health almost as much as spreading it out over the week.

How hard do I need to exercise?

Whether an activity is low, moderate, or high intensity varies according to your personal fitness level. A brisk jog, for example, may be low intensity for an athlete but high intensity for someone who’s never exercised before. As a general guideline:

- **Low intensity activity:** You can easily talk in full sentences.
- **Moderate intensity:** You can speak in full sentences, but not sing.
- **High intensity:** You are too breathless to speak in full sentences.

For most people, aiming for moderate intensity exercise is sufficient to improve your overall health. You should breathe a little heavier than normal, but not be out of breath. Your body should feel warmer as you move, but not overheated or sweating profusely. While everyone is different, don’t assume that training for a marathon is better than training for a 5K or 10K. There’s no need to overdo it.

Vary the intensity for faster results

Boosting your fitness while spending less time working out is the Holy Grail for everyone who exercises. But while most purported shortcuts are simply too good to be true, “interval training”—alternating low- and high-intensity activity—can actually deliver results.

Once you’ve warmed up, instead of walking at a moderate-intensity pace for 30 minutes, for example, try interval training for 20 minutes. Walk at a low-intensity pace for one minute followed by jogging at a high-intensity pace for one minute, then back to low-intensity walking for a minute, and so on.

Alternating intensity in this way will help you to squeeze a better workout into a shorter period of time. And as long as your doctor has cleared you to safely exercise this way, it can also help you lower your blood pressure, lose weight (especially around your middle), and maintain muscle mass.

Getting started safely

If you’ve never exercised before, or it’s been a significant amount of time since you’ve attempted any strenuous physical activity, keep the following health precautions in mind:

Health issues? Get medical clearance first. If you have health concerns such as heart disease, asthma, diabetes, or high blood pressure, talk with your doctor before you start to exercise.

Warm up. Warm up with dynamic stretches—active movements that warm and flex the muscles you’ll be using, such as leg kicks, walking lunges, or arm swings—and by doing a slower, easier version of the upcoming exercise. For example, if you’re going to run, warm up with walking. Or if you’re lifting weights, begin with a few light reps.

Cool down. After your workout, it’s important to take a few minutes to cool down and allow your heart rate to return to its resting rate. A light jog or walk after a run, for example, or some gentle stretches after strength exercises can also help prevent soreness and injuries.

Drink plenty of water. Your body performs best when it’s properly hydrated. Failing to drink enough water when you are exerting yourself over a prolonged period of time, especially in hot conditions, can be dangerous.

Listen to your body. If you feel pain or discomfort while working out, stop! If you feel better after a brief rest, you can slowly and gently resume your workout. But don’t try to power through pain. That’s a surefire recipe for injury.

How to make exercise a habit that sticks

There's a reason so many New Year's resolutions to get in shape crash and burn before February rolls around. And it's not that you simply don't have what it takes. Science shows us that there's a right way to build habits that last. Follow these steps to make exercise one of them.

Start small and build momentum

A goal of exercising for 30 minutes a day, 5 times a week may sound good. But how likely are you to follow through? The more ambitious your goal, the more likely you are to fail, feel bad about it, and give up. It's better to start with easy exercise goals you know you can achieve. As you meet them, you'll build self-confidence and momentum. Then you can move on to more challenging goals.

Make it automatic with triggers

Triggers are one of the secrets to success when it comes to forming an exercise habit. In fact, research shows that the most consistent exercisers rely on them. Triggers are simply reminders—a time of day, place, or cue—that kick off an automatic reaction. They put your routine on autopilot, so there's nothing to think about or decide on. The alarm clock goes off and you're out the door for your walk. You leave work for the day and head straight to the gym. You spot your sneakers right by the bed and you're up and running. Find ways to build them into your day to make exercise a no-brainer.

Reward yourself

People who exercise regularly tend to do so because of the rewards it brings to their lives, such as more energy, better sleep, and a greater sense of well-being. However, these tend to be long-term rewards. When you're starting an exercise program, it's important to give yourself immediate rewards when you successfully complete a workout or reach a new fitness goal. Choose something you look forward to, but don't allow yourself to do until after exercise. It can be something as simple as having a hot bath or a favorite cup of coffee.

Choose activities that make you feel happy and confident

If your workout is unpleasant or makes you feel clumsy or inept, you're unlikely to stick with it. Don't choose activities like running or lifting weights at the gym just because you think that's what you should do. Instead, pick activities that fit your lifestyle, abilities, and taste.

Set yourself up for success

Schedule it. You don't attend meetings and appointments spontaneously, you schedule them. If you're having trouble fitting exercise into your schedule, consider it an important appointment with yourself and mark it on your daily agenda.

Make it easy on yourself. Plan your workouts for the time of day when you're most awake and energetic. If you're not a morning person, for example, don't undermine yourself by planning to exercise before work.

Remove obstacles. Plan ahead for anything that might get in the way of exercising. Do you tend to run out of time in the morning? Get your workout clothes out the night before so you're ready to go as soon as you get up. Do you skip your evening workout if you go home first? Keep a gym bag in the car, so you can head out straight from work.

Hold yourself accountable. Commit to another person. If you've got a workout partner waiting, you're less likely to skip out. Or ask a friend or family member to check in on your progress. Announcing your goals to your social group (either online or in person) can also help keep you on track.

Tips for making exercise more enjoyable

As previously noted, you are much more likely to stick with an exercise program that's fun and rewarding. No amount of willpower is going to keep you going long-term with a workout you hate.

Think outside the gym

Does the thought of going to the gym fill you with dread? If you find the gym inconvenient, expensive, intimidating, or simply boring, that's okay. There are many exercise alternatives to weight rooms and cardio equipment.

For many, simply getting outside makes all the difference. You may enjoy running outdoors, where you can enjoy alone time and nature, even if you hate treadmills.

Just about everyone can find a physical activity they enjoy. But you may need to think beyond the standard running, swimming, and biking options. Here are a few activities you may find fun:

1. horseback riding

2. ballroom dancing
3. rollerblading
4. hiking
5. paddle boarding
6. kayaking

7. gymnastics
8. martial arts
9. rock climbing
10. Zumba
11. Ultimate Frisbee
12. fencing

Make it a game

Activity-based video games such as those from Wii and Kinect can be a fun way to start moving. So-called “exergames” that are played standing up and moving around—simulating dancing, skateboarding, soccer, bowling, or tennis, for example—can burn at least as many calories as walking on a treadmill; some substantially more. Once you build up your confidence, try getting away from the TV screen and playing the real thing outside. Or use a smartphone app to keep your workouts fun and interesting—some immerse you in interactive stories to keep you motivated, such as running from hordes of zombies!

Pair it with something you enjoy

Think about activities that you enjoy and how you can incorporate them into an exercise routine. Watch TV as you ride a stationary bike, chat with a friend as you walk, take photographs on a scenic hike, walk the golf course instead of using a cart, or dance to music as you do household chores.

Make it social

Exercise can be a fun time to socialize with friends and working out with others can help keep you motivated. For those who enjoy company but dislike competition, a running club, water aerobics, or dance class may be the perfect thing. Others may find that a little healthy competition keeps the workout fun and exciting. You might seek out tennis partners, join an adult soccer league, find a regular pickup basketball game, or join a volleyball team.

Getting the whole family involved

If you have a family, there are many ways to exercise together. What's more, kids learn by example, and if you exercise as a family you are setting a great example for their future. Family activities might include:

- Family walks in the evening if weather permits. Infants or young children can ride in a stroller.
- Blast upbeat music to boogie to while doing chores as a family.
- Seasonal activities, like skiing or ice skating in the winter and hiking, swimming, or cycling in the summer can both make fun family memories and provide healthy exercise.

Try a mindfulness approach

Instead of zoning out or distracting yourself when you exercise, try to pay attention to your body. By really focusing on how your body feels as you exercise—the rhythm of your breathing, the way your feet strike the ground, your muscles flexing as you move, even the way you feel on the inside—you'll not only improve your physical condition faster but also interrupt the flow of worries or negative thoughts running through your head, easing stress and anxiety. Exercising in this way can also help your nervous system become “unstuck” and begin to move out of the immobilization stress response that characterizes PTSD and trauma. Activities that engage both your arms and legs—such as walking (especially in sand), running, swimming, weight training, rock climbing, skiing, or dancing—are great choices for practicing mindfulness.

Easy ways to “sneak” more movement into your daily life

If you're not the kind of person who embraces a structured exercise program, try to think about physical activity as a lifestyle choice rather than a task to check off your to-do list. Look at your daily routine and consider ways to sneak in activity here and there. Even very small activities can add up over the course of a day.

Make chores count. House and yard work can be quite a workout, especially when done at a brisk pace. Scrub, vacuum, sweep, dust, mow, and weed—it all counts.

Look for ways to add extra steps. Take the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator. Park farther from a building entrance, rather than right out front. Get off your train or bus one stop early. The extra walking adds up.

Ditch the car whenever possible. Instead of driving everywhere, walk or bike instead when the distance is doable.

Move at work. Get up to talk to co-workers, rather than phoning or sending an email or IM. Take a walk during your coffee and lunch breaks. Use the bathroom on another floor. Walk while you're talking on the phone.

Exercise during commercial breaks. Make your TV less sedentary by exercising every time commercials come on or during the credits. Options include jumping jacks, sit-ups, or arm exercises using weights.

How getting a dog can boost fitness

[Owning a dog](#) leads to a more active lifestyle. Playing with a dog and taking him for a walk, hike, or run are fun and rewarding ways to fit exercise into your schedule. Studies have shown that dog owners are far more likely to meet their daily exercise requirements than non-owners. One year-long study found that walking an overweight dog helped both the animals and their owners lose weight (11 to 15 pounds). Researchers found that the dogs provided support in similar ways to a human exercise buddy, but with greater consistency and without any negative influence.

In another study, public housing residents who walked therapy dogs for up to 20 minutes, five days a week, lost an average of 14.4 pounds in a year, without changing their diets. If you're not in a position to own a dog, you can volunteer to walk homeless dogs for an animal shelter or rescue group. You'll not only be helping yourself, but by helping to socialize and exercise the dogs, you'll make them more adoptable.

How to stay motivated to exercise

No matter how much you enjoy an exercise routine, you may find that you eventually lose interest in it. That's the time to shake things up and try something new or alter the way you pursue the exercises that have worked so far.

Pair your workout with a treat. For example, you can listen to an audiobook or watch your favorite TV show while on the treadmill or stationary bike.

Log your activity. Keep a record of your workouts and fitness progress. Writing things down increases commitment and holds you accountable to your routine. Later on, it will also be encouraging to look back at where you began.

Harness the power of the community. Having others rooting for us and supporting us through exercise ups and downs helps to keep motivation strong. There are numerous

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online fitness communities you can join. You can also try working out with friends either in person or remotely using fitness apps that let you track and compare your progress with each other.

Get inspired. Read a health and fitness magazine or visit an exercise website and get inspired with photos of people being active. Sometimes reading about and looking at images of people who are healthy and fit can motivate you to move your body.

Related videos

Recommended reading



[Starting to Exercise](#) - Harvard Medical School Special Health Report

[Guide to Physical Activity](#) - Examples of physical activity that you might not have considered exercise. (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)

[Exercise: How to Get Started](#) - Exercise basics including stretches. (familydoctor.org)

[Fitness Basics](#) - Including how to overcome barriers, creative ways to exercise, and types of exercise. (Mayo Clinic)

[Tips to Help You Get Active](#) - A step-by-step guide to getting started. (National Institutes of Health)

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