

# What are the Best Exercises for Me?

## How to Build a Comprehensive Fitness Plan



Even when you understand just how much regular exercise can improve your mental and physical health—and you’ve managed to carve out time in your busy day to work out—that still leaves the question: How do I make the best use of the time I have available? You can always sign up for personal training sessions at a gym or find any number of workouts online or on a fitness app, but developing an exercise plan doesn’t have to be that complicated or expensive. Whatever your current fitness level, by mixing different types of physical activity, you can keep your workouts interesting and maximize the health benefits—from trimming your waistline and improving your sleep, mood, and energy to easing symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression.

## How much exercise do I need?

**At least 150 minutes (2.5 hours) of moderate-intensity activity per week.** That’s 30 minutes a day for 5 days a week, broken down into 10-minute bursts if that’s easier.

**Or at least 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise per week** will deliver the same benefits, if your fitness level allows you to work out harder. That means running for 15 minutes, for example, instead of walking briskly for 30 minutes.

**Include muscle-strengthening activity at least twice a week.**

**Or you can combine both moderate- and vigorous-intensity exercise**, remembering the general rule of thumb that 2 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise is the equivalent of 1 minute of vigorous-intensity activity.

## Getting Started

If you've never exercised before or have been sedentary for a long time, it's advisable (after consulting with your doctor) to start off slowly and gradually build up to these activity levels. Instead of 30 minutes of walking 5 days a week, for example, start with 5 or 10 minutes and build up from there. Similarly, once you've built up your fitness levels or if you already lead an active lifestyle and are in good overall health, there's no reason to limit your exercise to 150 minutes a week.

**You can gain additional health benefits by exercising for 300 minutes** (5 hours) or more at moderate-intensity (or 150 minutes or more of vigorous-intensity exercise) each week. This can be especially beneficial for weight loss.

A recent study in the UK found that people who squeeze all their exercise into one or two sessions over the weekend experience *almost* as many health benefits as those who work out more often. However, spreading your exercise sessions across three or more days a week may help reduce your risk of injury and keep your energy levels up throughout the week.

### Stand more during the day—every day

Sitting for extended periods of time has been linked with numerous health concerns, including elevated blood pressure, high blood sugar, more body fat, and an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Whether you spend too much time each day sitting at a desk, behind the wheel of a car, or on the couch watching TV, it's important to stand up for a couple of minutes every hour.

- Stand while talking on the phone.
- At work, try using a standing desk, or stand while talking to work colleagues.
- Get up from your desk at regular intervals and gently stretch.
- When watching TV, walk on the spot during commercial breaks or while the next episode of your favorite show is loading.

### Moderate-intensity vs. vigorous-intensity exercise

Whether an activity is low, moderate, or vigorous intensity depends a lot on your personal fitness level. A brisk jog, for example, may be low intensity for a seasoned athlete but vigorous intensity for someone who's never exercised before.

How intensely am I exercising?

## Low intensity

**How it feels:** Breathing easily, warming up but not yet sweating. Can easily talk in full sentences—or even sing.

**Activities include:**

- casual walking
- stretching
- tai chi

## Moderate intensity

**How it feels:** You're working, breathing faster, and starting to sweat more. You're still able to talk in full sentences, but not able to sing.

**Activities include:**

- brisk walking
- water aerobics
- riding a bike on level ground
- doubles tennis
- pushing a lawn mower
- hiking
- weight training
- skateboarding
- rollerblading
- volleyball

## Vigorous intensity

**How it feels:** Really working, breathing hard, sweating hard, and too breathless to talk in full sentences.

**Activities include:**

- jogging or running
- swimming fast
- riding a bike fast or on hills
- singles tennis
- soccer
- skipping rope
- aerobics
- martial arts
- gymnastics
- circuit training

## Vary the intensity for faster results

It's safe to say that the ultimate goal for most people who exercise is to boost fitness while spending less time working out. But while most purported shortcuts are simply too good to be true, "interval training"—bursts of vigorous-intensity activity alternating with lower-intensity activity—can actually deliver results.

For example, once you've warmed up, instead of walking at a moderate-intensity pace for 30 minutes, try interval training for 20 minutes. Walk at a moderate-intensity pace for one minute followed by jogging at a vigorous-intensity pace for one minute, then back to brisk walking for a minute, and so on. Or, you could alternate brisk walking with skipping rope or doing push-ups.

Alternating intensity in this way not only delivers cardiovascular benefits but can 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. Interval training can also be a great way to vary your workouts and challenge your muscles in new ways.

### Element 1: Cardio exercise



**What it is:** Cardiovascular or aerobic exercises are endurance activities that use your large muscle groups in rhythmic motion over a sustained period of time. Cardio workouts get your heart pumping and you'll breathe harder than normal and may even feel a little short of breath. Cardio activities include:

- Brisk walking
- Running
- Aerobics classes
- Stair climbing
- Basketball
- Tennis
  
- Hiking
- Cycling
- Rowing
- Soccer
- Dancing
- Elliptical training

**Why it's good for you:** Whatever your age, cardio can help to increase your lung capacity, strengthen your heart and muscles, and improve your stamina and endurance. Cardio workouts can also:

- Help control weight by burning calories and regulating appetite.
- Lower blood pressure and control blood sugar.
- Reduce the risk of falls in older adults.
- Improve memory and thinking; even help prevent mental decline and [manage symptoms of Alzheimer's](#).
- Reduce joint pain and stiffness.
- Release tension, boost your mood, and help you to [sleep better at night](#).

## Walking: an easy introduction to cardio exercise



Walking briskly for just 22 minutes a day will help you to reach your minimum weekly goal of 2.5 hours of moderate-intensity exercise—and in the process, lower your risk of heart disease and obesity. Walking doesn't require any special skills or training. Aside from a comfortable pair of shoes, you don't need any specialized equipment, and it can be done almost anywhere. You just have to resolve to get up and go.

**Look for creative ways to fit a brisk walk into your daily schedule.** Ditch the car and walk to the grocery store, for example, or take a walk during your lunch hour, or walk while you're talking on the phone.

**Use a walk to clear your head.** Use the time to take a break from the stressors of everyday life and give yourself some precious alone time. Fresh air and some time to think can work wonders for your mood.

**Or make it a social event and walk with others.** Invite friends, family members, or work colleagues to walk with you. Taking a walk can provide a great opportunity to catch up with an existing friend or strengthen the bond with a new one.

**Enjoy time in nature.** Walking in parks, on beaches, or along hiking trails or riverbanks can add to the mood boost you experience from exercising. Spending time in nature can release endorphins, the brain's feel-good chemicals that improve mood and relieve stress.

**Walk in a mall or on a treadmill.** When the weather's bad, you can walk briskly around a mall while window shopping or use a treadmill in a gym or health club and catch up on your favorite TV show or podcast.

**Walk a dog.** If don't 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 also be helping to socialize and exercise the dogs, making them more adoptable.

### Try mindful walking

Adding a mindfulness element to a walk can help break the flow of worries and negative thoughts that many of us experience when we're stressed, anxious, or depressed. Instead of focusing on your thoughts, focus on how your body feels as you move. Notice the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, for example, or the feeling of the wind or sunlight on your skin, or the rhythm of your breathing.

## Element 2: Strength training



**What it is:** Strength training, sometimes called resistance or power training, builds up muscles with repetitive motion using resistance from free weights, weight machines, elastic bands, or your own body weight. Power training is often strength training done at a faster speed to increase power and reaction times.

Examples of strength and power training activities include:

- Push-ups and pull-ups using your own body weight as resistance.
- Squats, curls, or shoulder presses using dumbbells, kettlebells, resistance bands or tubes, or even cans of food or other heavy household objects.
- Deadlifts or bench presses using a weight bar.
- Exercising with weight machines in a gym or fitness center.

**Why it's good for you:** Strength training builds and tones muscle and increases lean muscle mass. Aside from improving how you look and feel, resistance and power training can also:

- Help [manage your weight](#) by burning calories more efficiently and reducing body fat, especially around your middle.
- Ensure you have the strength to carry out everyday tasks such as carrying groceries, lifting your kids or grandkids, opening a jar, climbing stairs, or hurrying for a train or bus.
- Help you stay active and independent as you get older.
- Prevent loss of bone mass.
- Assist you in avoiding accidents and falls by improving your speed and reaction times.
- Trigger endorphins that improve your mood, relieve stress, and [ease symptoms of anxiety](#) and depression.
- Improve your flexibility, balance, and mobility.

### **The do's and don'ts of strength training**

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You don't need to spend hours every day lifting weights to enjoy the benefits of strength

training. Exercising the major muscle groups—legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms—in 20- to 30-minute sessions twice a week is enough to deliver results and help keep you toned and strong. Neither do you need to invest in a gym membership or buy expensive equipment for use at home. Inexpensive resistance bands can be used to exercise nearly every muscle in the body—and they can also fit easily into a bag or suitcase so you don't need to put your fitness regime on pause when you're traveling or on vacation. There are even plenty of exercises you can do using your own body weight as resistance.

- Always warm up before and cool down after strength training to reduce your risk of injury.
- If you're new to this type of exercise, it's important to learn the correct techniques to avoid injury. You can find free fitness classes at many community facilities. Apps and online video tutorials can also help, as can exercising in front of a mirror to ensure you're maintaining the right form as you work out.
- When it comes to choosing the right weight or resistance level, most people benefit from hitting muscle fatigue after 10 to 15 repetitions of an exercise. While you can build up to 3 sets of each exercise, a single set is a great place to start—and can be just as beneficial.
- As you progress and get stronger, you can challenge your muscles again by adding weight or using a band with more resistance.
- Try to leave 48 hours between exercising the same muscle group in order to give your muscles chance to recover. You can do cardio exercises in between full-body strength training sessions or exercise your upper-body muscles on one day, lower-body muscles the next.
- Always listen to your body and forget the old adage “no pain, no gain.” Strength training should never cause pain!

### **The importance of core-strength exercises**

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Many of us equate exercising our core with endless sit-ups and unobtainable images of washboard abs. But your core is much more than just your abdominal muscles. Your core stretches from below your breastbone down to your thighs and includes your back, sides, buttocks, and hips as well as your abdomen. A strong core can help you maintain good posture and carry out many different daily movements that involve twisting, bending, or rotating your body. Everything from getting out of a chair to carrying heavy groceries or reaching for a book on the top shelf are all made easier when you have a strong core.

Strengthening your core can also:

- Help alleviate and prevent lower back pain.
- Improve performance in many different sports, from tennis and golf to running, swimming, and cycling.



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- Help prevent falls as you get older.
- Improve endurance.
- Lower your risk of injury.

As well as abdominal crunches, activities that are particularly good at targeting your core include yoga, Pilates, swimming, beach volleyball, kayaking or canoeing, rollerblading, surfing or stand-up paddle boarding, using a hula hoop, or performing perhaps the most popular core exercise, the plank. For guidelines on how to correctly perform the plank, see the Recommended reading section below.

### Element 3: Flexibility and balance



**What it is:** Flexibility challenges the ability of your body's joints to move freely through a full range of motion. Balance maintains stability, whether you're stationary or moving around.

Good flexibility exercises include:

- Stationary stretches and stretches that involve movement.
- Yoga.
- Pilates.

If you're already active, chances are you currently engage in exercises that improve balance, such as walking, hiking, cycling, golf, tennis, or strength training (especially core-strength training). However, balance typically worsens as we age, so if you're an older adult looking to specifically improve your balance, you can do so by trying:

- Yoga, Pilates, or tai chi.
- Exercises such as standing on one leg, walking backwards, or using a wobble board.
- Strength training the muscles of your back, abdomen, and legs.

**Why it's good for you:** Flexibility helps your body stay limber and increases your range of movement for sports as well as daily physical activities such as reaching, looking behind

while driving, and bending to tie your shoes. Flexibility exercises that lengthen and stretch muscles also help to:

- Keep your muscles and joints supple and less prone to injury.
- Prevent back pain.
- Improve your athletic performance.
- Prevent balance problems.
- Increase circulation.
- Relieve tension and stress; [promote relaxation](#).

Balance exercises can help to improve your posture and reduce your risk of falling as you get older.

### Only stretch warm muscles

Fitness experts advise against stretching *before* you exercise when your muscles are cold. Rather, stretch only once your muscles are warmed up or *after* your workout, as part of your cool-down routine.

### Improving flexibility and balance with yoga, Pilates, and tai chi

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As well as the meditative and relaxation benefits, low-impact practices such as yoga, Pilates, and tai chi are great for improving flexibility and balance. While there are differences between the forms, each offer plenty of options for the beginner and seasoned practitioner alike.

**Yoga.** An ancient exercise practice that involves performing different postures and poses on an exercise mat, there are many different types of yoga that can help with flexibility and balance as well as strength and stamina. In addition to the popular types, there are yoga classes modified for different needs, such as prenatal yoga, yoga for seniors, and adaptive yoga [modified for disabilities](#). Most yoga sessions begin with a series of poses to warm up the body, and most sessions end with some type of relaxation exercise.

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Yoga boosts muscle strength, flexibility, and balance. Yoga also encourages deep, slow breathing, which helps lower blood pressure by an average of five points after a few months of regular practice

*Source: Harvard men's health letter April 2019*

Find the type of yoga that's right for you

## Gentle yoga or Satyananda

Focuses on slow stretches, flexibility, deep breathing.

**Best for:** Beginners, stress reduction.

**Not for:** Those looking for a vigorous workout.

## Hatha

Reasonably gentle. Involves stretching, breathing work.

**Best for:** Beginners, older adults, stress reduction.

**Not for:** An aerobic, calorie-burning workout.

## Iyengar

Focuses on precise body alignment and improving balance. Uses blocks and straps to maintain poses longer.

**Best for:** Those looking for more fitness benefits as well as deep relaxation.

**Not for:** While more vigorous, not a total body workout.

## Kundalini

Fast-paced routine of poses focusing on different ways of breathing, chanting, and meditation.

**Best for:** Combining a good workout with spirituality.

**Not for:** Those uncomfortable with chanting or the spiritual aspect.

## Hot yoga (Bikram or Moshka)

Takes place in heated rooms (more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit). Focus on stamina and purification.

**Best for:** Intense, sweaty workout for those with higher fitness levels.

**Not for:** Anyone with high blood pressure, heart conditions, or those who may react adversely to hot conditions.

## Power yoga or Ashtanga

Vigorous, fast-paced to build flexibility, strength, concentration, and stamina.

**Best for:** Strong workout, improving fitness and weight loss.

**Not for:** A relaxing, contemplative experience.

**Pilates.** Like yoga, Pilates can be performed on a mat as a series of low-impact movement patterns, although it most commonly involves the use of resistance machines. A typical Pilates routine includes exercises that promote posture, balance, flexibility, and core strength. Most routines can be tailored according to your strength and fitness levels.

**Tai chi.** Focusing on a series of slow, precise body movements that flow from one pose to

the next, tai chi is a very effective exercise for balance, especially in older adults looking for a safe and gentle exercise. By moving weight from one leg to another, and alternately raising the arms, legs and hands, tai chi varies the weight on different joints, increasing flexibility and range of motion and improving balance and coordination. And by focusing your mind on your movements and breathing, you keep your attention on the present, which clears the mind and leads to a relaxed state.

**Learning yoga, Pilates, or tai chi.** While you can learn these exercises online, from an instructional book, video, or app, the best and safest way is to learn from a competent instructor.

- Look for classes at local gyms, YMCAs, and specialized yoga or Pilates studios, which often offer the first class free so you can give it a try. Community centers and senior centers may also offer classes at discounted prices.
- Talk to the instructor. Many will be able to provide modified poses or programs for beginners or those with special health concerns.
- Look for a low-pressure environment where you can learn at your own pace. Don't extend yourself beyond what feels comfortable, and always back off of a pose or exercise at the first sign of pain. A good teacher can show you alternatives for poses that are too challenging for your health or fitness level.

## Getting started safely

Committing to a regular, balanced exercise schedule is one of the best things you can do to improve your physical and mental health. However, it's important to do it safely. Nothing can derail your fitness goals quicker than a medical problem or avoidable injury.

**Get medical clearance** from your doctor before starting an exercise program, especially if you have a preexisting condition.

**Warm up.** Warm up gently 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 training.

**Drink plenty of water.** It may seem obvious, but your body does perform better when it's properly hydrated. And failing to drink enough water when you're exerting yourself, especially in hot conditions, can be dangerous.

**Listen to your body.** If you feel pain or discomfort while working out, stop! Don't try to power through pain. That's a surefire recipe for injury.

### Find activities you enjoy

You're 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. For more on making exercise enjoyable and staying motivated, see [How to Start Exercising and Stick with It](#).

### Recommended reading

[Stretches for Exercise and Flexibility](#) - Stretches that focus on different parts of the body. (American Heart Association)

[Weight training exercises](#) - Illustrated tips on starting a weight training program. (Mayo Clinic)

[A strong core: The simple, flexible, and portable workout](#) - Simple core exercises you can do at home or in the office. (Harvard Health Publishing)

[Core-strength exercises](#) - Core workouts for you to try at home. (Mayo Clinic)

### Recommended app

**Yoga for Complete Beginners:** A free introductory yoga app with a series of 3 different yoga classes.

[Yoga for Complete Beginners \(iOS\)](#)

[Yoga for Complete Beginners \(Android\)](#)

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