

Physical activity - choosing the one for you

Once you've decided to build physical activity into your daily life, the next most important decision is the activity you choose. Look for a type of physical activity that you're likely to enjoy. You are more likely to abandon a healthy lifestyle change if your chosen activity doesn't suit your preferences or lifestyle.

See your doctor for advice, support and a medical check-up before you start any new physical activity program. This is particularly important if you are over 40 years, overweight, haven't exercised in a long time or suffer from a chronic medical condition.

What's your style?

Do you like things organised or prefer a more casual approach? Do you like to do things on your own or to be part of a group-based activity?

Some issues you may like to consider include:

- **Exercising alone** – this is a good option if your busy schedule prevents you from planning a regular time to be active every day. However, unless you are self-motivated, you may find yourself putting off physical activity and never doing it.
- **Training buddy** – you may be more likely to commit to a physical activity routine if you are doing it with someone else, because you don't want to let your training buddy down.
- **Team sports and group physical activity programs** – organised activities offer the chance to widen your social circle. However, training sessions and regular matches can also demand a lot of your time.
- **Mixing it up** – some people like to combine two or three options. For example, you may choose to exercise alone on two or three days of the week, and train with a buddy or participate in a team sport on a couple of the other days. Variety helps prevent boredom.

What are your health goals?

While any type of physical activity is good for you, different physical activities offer different results. Deciding your health goals will steer you towards the right intensity of activity for you.

For example, weight-bearing activities such as walking, running, weight training or cycling are good choices for weight management because they help burn kilojoules.

Tips to help you choose the right physical activity

Try to choose an activity you enjoy and that suits your lifestyle. Suggestions include:

- Don't choose an outdoor activity if you are bothered by weather extremes such as heat or cold.
- Don't pick an activity solely because you think it would be 'good' for you – enjoyment is the key to sticking to your plan.
- Think back. Did you enjoy a particular physical activity as a child, such as cycling or basketball? If so, give that activity another go.
- Keep your budget in mind. Some physical activities, such as skiing or sailing, can require a big financial investment. Decide whether you can afford expensive equipment.
- Be realistic about your current health and level of fitness. If you are a beginner, the physical demands of certain activities (such as running) may be too much at first. Choose a gentler alternative and work your way up.
- Choose at least a couple of activities to help keep you interested. You may get bored and lose motivation if you stick to only one form of physical activity.

Weigh up the pros and cons

Consider the advantages and disadvantages of the following activities to help you decide which may be best for you.

Cycling

Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – cycling is weight-bearing activity that is gentle on the joints. It burns plenty of kilojoules and improves your cardiovascular health. It can also be built into your day as a means of transport.
- **Issues to keep in mind** – a good quality bicycle can be expensive. You need to regularly check your bicycle for signs of wear and tear and fix it if necessary. Protective equipment (including a helmet) is essential. Be traffic conscious and plan your route.

Exercise videos or DVDs

Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – exercise videos or DVDs used at home can give you the expertise of an instructor without the expense or inconvenience of attending a gym. You can also work out whenever you have the time.
- **Issues to keep in mind** – you might become bored or lose motivation, especially if you only have one or two videos to choose from. You might like to exercise with a neighbour, to break the routine, or borrow new tapes from the library. You also need to follow instructions carefully and include warm-ups to avoid injury. Make sure the instructors on the videos are qualified. Just because someone is a celebrity does not mean they have relevant qualifications or knowledge.

Gym membership

Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – gyms stock a wide range of equipment and offer classes such as aerobics or Pilates. Taking full advantage of your membership should give you plenty of opportunities to improve your all-round health and fitness. Instructors should be on hand to help you use equipment correctly and reduce your risk of injuries.
- **Issues to keep in mind** – gym memberships can be expensive. You may not have access to the equipment you want if you attend the gym at busy times:- for example, after work hours. You may feel embarrassed or intimidated by working out in front of other people.

Home fitness equipment

Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – examples of home fitness equipment include stationary bicycles, treadmills and cross-trainers that work the arms and legs at the same time. Exercising on home fitness equipment is ideal for people who are housebound (such as parents of small children) or for those who don't wish to exercise outdoors or in gyms. You can also exercise while watching television or listening to music if you want to.
- **Issues to keep in mind** – home fitness equipment is expensive and takes up a lot of space. Walking, running or cycling in the one spot can also be boring. Many people stop using their home fitness equipment within five years of buying it. If you start a home exercise routine, a qualified person must show you how to use the equipment. Otherwise you risk injury or may become disappointed when you don't reach your goals.

Running

Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – running is a weight-bearing activity so it helps to build strong bones. It's one of the best ways to increase your cardiovascular fitness and burns lots of kilojoules.
- **Issues to consider** – the impact of each foot striking the ground puts a heavy load on joints, ligaments, tendons and muscles throughout the body, which could lead to injury. Running does need equipment, including properly fitted running shoes. If you run along major roads, you may breathe in exhaust fumes from passing vehicles. Running is not advisable for people who are unfit, obese or new to regular exercise.

Swimming

Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – swimming is a low-impact activity. The buoyancy of the water supports your body so the risk of musculoskeletal injury is small. Swimming strokes exercise the entire body but particularly the muscles of the back, chest and arms. Swimming is an ideal form of exercise for most people, particularly people who are frail, elderly or obese.
- **Issues to consider** – swimming is a learned skill. You may need to take swimming lessons if you are a beginner. Swimming is not a weight-bearing activity. Compared with weight-bearing activities, such as walking or running, you will not strengthen bones or burn as many kilojoules.

Team sports

Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – team sports offer friendship and fun. It is easier to exercise when you are enjoying yourself. Most team sports, such as soccer or netball, quickly build cardiovascular health because of the required running and quick bursts of activity.
- **Issues to consider** – the stop-start nature of most team sports may put strain on the joints and ligaments. This can increase the risk of musculoskeletal injury, particularly of the knees and ankles. Team sports tend to be seasonal (such as winter or summer), so you'll need an exercise plan for the off-season. Training sessions or matches may be cancelled because of bad weather.

Walking

Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – walking is an ideal exercise, especially for beginners. It is free, easy to perform and doesn't require any special training or equipment apart from a good pair of shoes and a hat for sun protection. You can walk alone, with a friend or you can join a local walking group.
- **Issues to consider** – some people feel unsafe walking the streets alone. Remember there are alternatives such as walking with a companion or a walking group.

Strength training

Strength training includes training with free weights, body weight training, chair exercises and rubber resistance. Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – strength training is a weight-bearing activity so it strengthens bones, builds muscle and burns kilojoules. Strength training involves not just the targeted muscles but surrounding muscles too. For example, you need to brace your torso during bicep curls to prevent yourself from wobbling. Strength training can help to improve and maintain your independence in any day-to-day activity.
- **Issues to consider** – strength training must be built up gradually. Incorrect technique (form) or trying to use heavier weights than you can manage may put you at risk of musculoskeletal injuries. Get professional advice from a physiotherapist, exercise physiologist, gym or qualified fitness instructor.

Strength training – machines

Things to consider include:

- **Benefits** – like training with free weights, training with machines is a weight-bearing activity. Each machine is designed to target a specific muscle group so this activity is ideal for beginners.
- **Issues to consider** – you'll need either a gym membership or home equipment, which can be expensive. You will need to be taught by a professional to ensure your routine builds up progressively. You will also need advice on the best type of equipment to achieve your health goals and match your body shape.

Further information

The Better Health Channel has an extensive range of fact sheets on various sports and physical activities. Browse through these topics to learn more about the pros and cons of each form of exercise.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Local council
- Neighbourhood gym

Things to remember

- Deciding your health goals will steer you towards the right type of physical activity for you.
- Enjoyment is the key to maintaining an exercise program.
- See your doctor for a medical check-up before embarking on any new physical activity program.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Physical Activity Australia

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