Exercise programs

Summary

- A customised exercise program is a great way to stay fit and will bring a wide range of physical and mental benefits.
- Complete the Adult Pre-Exercise Screening Questionnaire and see your doctor for a check-up if required.
- Ask your healthcare professional to refer you to an exercise program suited to you.
- Consider your fitness goals. Are you starting a fitness program to help you lose weight or for some other reason?
- Start slowly, build up gradually and monitor your progress.

Exercise programs are becoming more popular. There are gyms and other fitness providers with many different types of classes, exercise routines and equipment, catering to a wide range of people.

If you are unfamiliar with what is involved, starting an exercise program can be challenging. Talk to a registered exercise professional to find out about the many options available.

Health benefits of exercise programs

An exercise program that is designed specifically for you is a great way to stay physically and mentally fit. It also provides many other benefits, including:

- improved condition of the heart and lungs
- increased muscular strength, endurance and motor fitness
- increased aerobic fitness
- improved muscle tone and strength
- weight management
- better coordination, agility and flexibility
- improved balance and spatial awareness
- increased energy levels
- increased physical confidence
- reduced risk of chronic disease (such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease)
- improved sleep
- improved brain health
- improved general and psychological wellbeing
- greater self-confidence and self-esteem
- improved social life.

Before beginning your exercise program

Before you get started, it will help if you:

- complete the adult pre-exercise screening tool (pdf) from Fitness Australia
- consult your doctor or allied health professional
- work out your individual fitness level
- design your fitness program
- assemble your equipment.

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If you are unsure on any of the above, you can seek help from an exercise professional. Recognised industry associations such as Fitness Australia hold a directory of Registered Exercise Professionals, where you search for a professional based on their location skills and qualifications.

Assessing your fitness level for an exercise program

You probably have some idea of how fit you are. However, assessing and recording baseline (starting) fitness scores can give you benchmarks (points of comparison) against which to measure your progress.

Before you start your new exercise program, record:
- your pulse rate (heart rate) before and after a walk
- how long you take to walk a certain distance
- how many push-ups or squats you can do in 30 seconds
- your waist circumference (measured midway between the top of your hip bone and bottom of your ribs).
- your body mass index (BMI). This is calculated by dividing your weight in kilograms by the square of your height in metres. If you would like this accurately assessed, visit your local registered allied health or fitness provider.

(Note: Some medications affect your heart rate. If you are taking any medications that do so, consult a health or exercise professional and consider another way of measuring your exertion levels, such as the Borg scale.) The Fitness Australia pre-exercise screening system (pdf) contains exercise intensity guidelines, including exertion and other descriptive measures. It is advisable to consult an exercise or health professional to help you interpret this information and work out what is best for you.

Designing your fitness program

When you design your fitness program, points to keep in mind include:
- Consider your goals. Are you starting a fitness program to lose weight or for some other reason?
- Think about your likes and dislikes. Choose activities you will enjoy.
- Plan a logical progression of activity. If you’re just beginning to exercise, start cautiously and progress slowly. Answer the adult pre-exercise screening questions and take appropriate action.
- Build activity into your daily routine. Schedule time to exercise as you would any other appointment.
- Think variety. By varying your activities (cross-training), you can avoid exercise boredom.
- Allow time for recovery after exercising and make sure you have an adequate healthy diet.
- Put it on paper. A written plan can encourage you to stay on track.

Assemble your exercise clothing and equipment

Be sure to pick shoes designed for the activity you have in mind, as well as for your foot type [insert link to Choosing the right shoe for you doc]. If you’re planning to buy gym equipment, choose something that’s practical, enjoyable and easy to use.

Getting started on your exercise program

Remember to:
- Start slowly and build up gradually.
- Break activities up if you have to.
- Be creative – include other activities such as walking, cycling, swimming or dancing in your routine.
- Listen to your body – don’t push yourself too hard.
- Be flexible – if you’re not feeling good, give yourself permission to take a day or two off.

Monitoring progress on your exercise program

Assess your progress six weeks after you start your program (by measuring the same parameters as you did to record your baseline fitness) and then every eight to twelve weeks. You may need to adjust the time, intensity and type of exercise you do in order to continue improving. On the other hand, you may be pleasantly surprised to find that you’re exercising just the right amount to meet your fitness goals.
If you start to lose motivation, set new goals or try a new activity. Exercising with a friend or taking a class at a local fitness centre may help.

**Where to get help**

- Your local council
- Registered exercise professional
- **Fitness Australia** Tel. 1300 211 311