Resistance training — health benefits
Resistance training – health benefits

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Resistance training increases muscle strength by making your muscles work against a weight or force. Different forms of resistance training include using free weights, weight machines, resistance bands and your own body weight. A beginner needs to train two or three times per week to gain the maximum benefit.

Complete the adult pre-exercise screening tool and consult with professionals, such as your doctor, exercise physiologist, physiotherapist or registered exercise professional, before you start a new fitness program.

Rest each muscle group for at least 48 hours to maximise gains in strength and size. Varying your workouts can help you push past a training plateau.

Resistance training (also called strength training or weight training) is the use of resistance to muscular contraction to build the strength, anaerobic endurance and size of skeletal muscles.

Resistance training is based on the principle that muscles of the body will work to overcome a resistance force when they are required to do so. When you do resistance training repeatedly and consistently, your muscles become stronger.

A well-rounded fitness program includes strength training to improve joint function, bone density, muscle, tendon and ligament strength, as well as aerobic exercise to improve your heart and lung fitness, flexibility and balance exercises. Australia’s physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines recommend that adults do muscle strengthening activities on at least two days each week.

Vary your progressive resistance training program every six to eight weeks to maintain improvement. Variables that can impact on your results include:

- sets
- repetitions
- exercises undertaken
- intensity (weights used)
- frequency of sessions
- rest between sets.

If you vary your resistance training program through the number of repetitions and sets performed, exercises undertaken and weights used, you will maintain any strength gains you make.

Examples of resistance training

There are many ways you can strengthen your muscles, whether at home or the gym.

Different types of resistance training include:

- free weights – classic strength training tools such as dumbbells, barbells and kettlebells
- medicine balls or sand bags – weighted balls or bags
- weight machines – devices that have adjustable seats with handles attached either to weights or hydraulics
- resistance bands – like giant rubber bands – these provide resistance when stretched. They are portable and can be adapted to most workouts. The bands provide continuous resistance throughout a movement
- suspension equipment – a training tool that uses gravity and the user's body weight to complete various exercises
- your own body weight – can be used for squats, push-ups and chin-ups. Using your own body weight is convenient, especially when travelling or at work.

Health benefits of resistance training

Physical and mental health benefits that can be achieved through resistance training include:

- improved muscle strength and tone – to protect your joints from injury
- maintaining flexibility and balance, which can help you remain independent as you age
- weight management and increased muscle-to-fat ratio – as you gain muscle, your body burns more kilojoules when at rest
- may help reduce or prevent cognitive decline in older people
- greater stamina – as you grow stronger, you won’t get tired as easily
- prevention or control of chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, back pain, depression and obesity
- pain management
- improved mobility and balance
- improved posture
- decreased risk of injury
- increased bone density and strength and reduced risk of osteoporosis
- improved sense of wellbeing – resistance training may boost your self-confidence, improve your body image and your mood
- improved sleep and avoidance of insomnia
• increased self-esteem
• enhanced performance of everyday tasks.

Basic principles of resistance training

Resistance training consists of various components. Basic principles include:

- **program** – your overall fitness program is composed of various exercise types such as aerobic training, flexibility training, strength training and balance exercises
- **weight** – different weights or other types of resistance, for example a 3 kg hand weight or fixed weight, body weight or rubber band will be used for different exercises during your strength training session
- **exercise** – a particular movement, for example a calf-raise, is designed to strengthen a particular muscle or group of muscles
- **repetitions or reps** – refers to the number of times you continuously repeat each exercise in a set
- **set** – is a group of repetitions performed without resting, for example, two sets of squats by 15 reps would mean you do 15 squats then rest muscles before doing another 15 squats
- **rest** – you need to rest between sets. Rest periods vary depending on the intensity of exercise being undertaken
- **variety** – switching around your workout routine, such as regularly introducing new exercises, challenges your muscles and forces them to adapt and strengthen
- **progressive overload principle** – to continue to gain benefits, strength training activities need to be done to the point where it’s hard for you to do another repetition. The aim is to use an appropriate weight or resistant force that will challenge you, while maintaining good technique. Also, regular adjustments to the training variables, such as frequency, duration, exercises for each muscle group, number of exercises for each muscle group, sets and repetitions, help to make sure you progress and improve
- **recovery** – muscle needs time to repair and adapt after a workout. A good rule of thumb is to rest the muscle group for up to 48 hours before working the same muscle group again.

Resistance training for beginners

Pre-exercise screening is used to identify people with medical conditions that may put them at a higher risk of experiencing a health problem during physical activity. It is a filter or safety net to help decide if the potential benefits of exercise outweigh the risks for you.

Print a copy of Fitness Australia’s adult pre-exercise screening tool and discuss it with your doctor, allied health or exercise professional.

The Australian Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines recommend that you undertake strength building activities at least two days a week. These activities should work all the major muscle groups of your body (legs, hips, back, chest, core, shoulders, and arms).

Starting resistance training

It is important to pay attention to safety and form in order to reduce the risk of injury. A registered exercise professional can help you develop a safe and effective program.

To start, a typical beginner’s strength training program involves:

- eight to ten exercises that work the major muscle groups of the body and are performed two to three times per week
- beginning with one set of each exercise, comprising as few as eight repetitions (reps), no more than twice per week.

Your aim is to gradually increase to two to three sets for each exercise – comprising eight to 12 reps, every second or third day. Once you can comfortably complete 12 reps of an exercise, you should look at progressing further.

Warming up before resistance training

Warm up your body before starting your strength training exercises. Start with light aerobic exercise (such as walking, cycling or rowing) for around five minutes in addition to a few dynamic stretches. Dynamic stretching involves slow controlled movements through the full range of motion.

Advanced resistance training

To get the most gain from resistance training, progressively increase the intensity of your training according to your experience and training goals. This may mean increasing the weight, changing the duration of the contraction (the time during which you sustain holding the weight at your muscle’s maximum potential), reducing rest time or increasing the volume of training.

Once you’ve been doing resistance training regularly for four to six weeks, you can progressively increase the intensity of your training as your muscles adapt.

Research suggests that expert supervision and instruction may improve your results as it will ensure you practice proper technique and follow safety principles. If you experience any discomfort or pain, contact a health professional before progressing with your program.

Repetitive maximum (RM) and resistance training

The best way to develop muscle strength is for the muscle to contract to its maximum potential at any given time – maximal voluntary contraction (MVC). In resistance training, MVC is measured by the term XRM, where RM is the maximum number of repetitions that can be completed with a given resistance or weight. X is the number of times a certain weight can be lifted before the muscle fatigues.

It is the RM range that determines what type of improvements the muscles will make. The optimal range for improving muscle strength is 8–12 RM for a beginner and 2–6 RM for the more advanced.

For example, the formula 7RM means the person can lift the weight (let’s say 50 kg) seven times before the muscles are too fatigued to continue. Higher weights mean lower RM – for example, the same person could possibly lift a 65 kg weight, but fewer than seven times.

Lower weights typically result in a higher RM – for example, the same person could lift a 35 kg weight about 12 times before muscle fatigue sets in. MVC principles can help you gain the most benefit from your workouts. A good rule of thumb is to only increase the weight between two and 10 per cent once you can comfortably do two sets.
Applying MVC to meet advanced resistance training goals

The principles of strength training involve manipulation of the number of repetitions (reps), sets, tempo, exercises and force to overload a group of muscles and produce the desired change in strength, endurance, size or shape.

Specific combinations of reps, sets, exercises, resistance and force will determine the type of muscle development you achieve. General guidelines, using the RM range, include:

- muscle power: 1 – 6 RM per set, performed explosively
- muscle strength/power: 3 – 12 RM per set, fast or controlled
- muscle strength/size: 6 – 20 RM per set, controlled
- muscle endurance: 15 – 20 or more RM per set, controlled.

Muscle recovery during advanced resistance training

Muscle needs time to repair and grow after a workout. Not giving your muscles enough time to recover means they will not get bigger or stronger. A good rule of thumb is to rest the muscle group for at least 48 hours.

Once you have sufficient experience in resistance training, and with the support of a qualified allied health or exercise professional, you might like to consider a split program. For example, you could work your upper body on Mondays and Fridays, and your lower body on Wednesdays and Sundays.

Gaining strength from advanced resistance training

Most beginners experience a rapid increase in strength, followed by a plateau or levelling-out of strength improvements. After that, gains in muscle strength and size are hard-earned.

When you start resistance training, most of your initial increase in strength is due to a phenomenon called neural adaptation. This means that the nerves servicing the muscles change their behaviour. The nerves are thought to fire more frequently (prompting increased muscle contraction) and more motor units are recruited to perform the contraction (a motor unit is the nerve cell and its associated muscle fibres). This means you become stronger, but the muscles remain the same size – you’ve hit the plateau.

In time, muscle cells respond to continuous resistance training by increasing in size (hypertrophy), so don’t be discouraged by reaching the plateau – it is actually an encouraging sign that gains in muscle size are soon to follow. Various techniques may help you shorten the plateau period.

Varying your workouts can help you push past a plateau. The theory of variation is that you can coax growth and strength from your muscles by surprising them with a range of different stresses. The muscles will respond in size and strength as they are forced to adapt.

Be guided by your gym instructor or personal trainer, but suggestions include:

- Increase the number of repetitions.
- Increase your workout by 10 or 15 minutes.
- Increase the frequency of workouts, keeping in mind that each muscle needs at least 48 hours of recovery time. Once you are more experienced, you may like to consider splitting body parts over the different days of the week – for example, chest, shoulders and triceps in session one, back, biceps and abdominal muscles in session two, and legs in session three.
- Switch to different exercises – for example, focus on exercises that use multiple muscle groups and that are functional or specific in nature, meaning that they relate to activities of daily living or sporting requirements.
- Increase the weight by about five to 10 per cent.
- Cross-train with other activities such as swimming or running.
- Change your workout about every four to eight weeks to keep your muscles guessing.

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Physiotherapist
- Accredited exercise physiologist
- Registered exercise professional
- Fitness Australia Tel. 1300 211 311

References

- Australia’s physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines, Department of Health and Ageing, Australian Government.

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Keeping active

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Keeping active basics
Keeping active basics

- Balancing energy in and energy out
  A kilojoule is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance...
- Body mass index (BMI)
  Body mass index or BMI is an approximate measure of your total body fat...
- Energy in food (kilojoules and calories)
  A kilojoule is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance...
- Exercise intensity
  If you can talk but not sing, you’re exercising at the right intensity...
- Exercise in your local surroundings (video)
  Want to exercise, but find gyms boring or expensive? Sue Stanley and Shane Bilsborough team up to show you how to exercise indoors and outdoors using your local surroundings - whether it's running up...
- Exercise - the low-down on hydration
  You need to drink enough and regularly to keep hydrated during exercise...
- Exercise with a friend
  Exercise is important for your physical and mental health. Working out with a friend means you’re more likely to have fun and stick to your exercise plan...
- Fitness centres – how to choose one
  Do some research before signing up at a fitness centre...
- How to make exercise fun (slideshow)
  Many of us find it difficult to stick to some form of exercise, others don’t know where to start. Experts say the key to taking up or keeping to any form of physical activity is to have fun. Get off...
- Kids and energy needs
  It’s important for kids to eat a wide variety of foods for a healthy, well-balanced diet and to be physically active. Creating healthy habits during childhood helps to ensure lifelong healthy...
- Personal trainers – how to choose one
  Make sure your personal trainer is properly qualified before entering into any agreement...
- Physical activity for men
  Many men are only motivated to become more active after they have a health scare...
- Physical activity for seniors
  Physical activity can help older people maintain independence, recover from illness and reduce their risk of disease...
- Physical activity for women
  If you can't make the time to exercise for yourself, do it for your family...
- Physical activity - how to get active when you are busy
  Even if you’re busy, you still need to find a way to be physically active...
- Physical activity - it's important
  Just 30 minutes of moderate activity each day can improve your health and reduce the risk of developing certain conditions or diseases...
- Physical activity – setting yourself goals
  When you’re trying to become more physically active, set realistic health and fitness goals...
- Physical activity - what’s your excuse?

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There are many excuses we can come up with to avoid being active, but the truth is there is always a way to fit some physical activity into your day...

- **Resistance training – health benefits**
  If you do resistance training repeatedly and consistently, your muscles become stronger...

- **Secrets to healthy ageing (slideshow)**
  Experts say the key to living well into our 80s and 90s is making a commitment to live healthily. Check out these simple ideas and embrace your senior years!

### Getting started

- **Exercise programs**
  If you are unfamiliar with what is involved, starting an exercise program can be challenging...

- **Exercise - the low-down on hydration**
  You need to drink enough and regularly to keep hydrated during exercise...

- **Exercise with a friend**
  Exercise is important for your physical and mental health. Working out with a friend means you’re more likely to have fun and stick to your exercise plan...

- **Gardening for children**
  Children can learn new skills, have fun and develop self-confidence when they grow their own plants...

- **Gardening for health - starting out**
  Gardening is a healthy activity that can be enjoyed by everyone...

- **Gardening for older people**
  Garden spaces and equipment can be modified or adapted to help older people enjoy gardening...

- **Gardening safety**
  Gardening is an enjoyable form of exercise, but you need to take care...

- **Getting active - tucker talk tips**
  The main thing is to choose physical activities that you enjoy and that you can stick to in the long term...

- **How to make exercise fun (slideshow)**
  Many of us find it difficult to stick to some form of exercise, others don’t know where to start. Experts say the key to taking up or keeping to any form of physical activity is to have fun. Get off...

- **Physical activity - choosing a provider**
  Choosing the right fitness centre or service provider requires some research...

- **Physical activity – choosing the one for you**
  You are more likely to keep up a healthy lifestyle change if your chosen activity suits you...

- **Physical activity for men**
  Many men are only motivated to become more active after they have a health scare...

- **Physical activity for seniors**
  Physical activity can help older people maintain independence, recover from illness and reduce their risk of disease...

- **Physical activity for women**
  If you can't make the time to exercise for yourself, do it for your family...

- **Physical activity - how to get active when you are busy**
  Even if you're busy, you still need to find a way to be physically active...

- **Physical activity – how to get started**
  If you've been inactive and want to begin physical activity, see a doctor first...

- **Physical activity - learn how to swim (video)**
  Swimming is a great low-impact exercise for all ages and abilities. Australian marathon swimmer, Tammy Van Wisse shows ex-AFL (Australian Football League) player and coach, Tony Shaw some swimming...

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Physical activity - overcoming barriers (video)

Former world aerobics champion, Sue Stanley shows us how to overcome common exercise excuses.

Physical activity – overcoming the barriers

If you think physical activity is boring, try exercising with a friend.

Physical activity – setting yourself goals

When you're trying to become more physically active, set realistic health and fitness goals.

Staying fit and motivated

10 tips to plan your exercise

Physical activity won't just happen. Most activities require planning – starting and maintaining a physical activity program does too. Here are some tips for getting ready to exercise:

- Make a plan

10 tips to stay active year round

Pick an activity you enjoy

Exercise and mood

Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise.

Exercise - everyday activities

There are lots of everyday activities that provide an opportunity to be active and provide health benefits.

Exercise in your local surroundings (video)

Want to exercise, but find gyms boring or expensive? Sue Stanley and Shane Bilborough team up to show you how to exercise indoors and outdoors using your local surroundings - whether it's running up...

Exercise programs

If you are unfamiliar with what is involved, starting an exercise program can be challenging.

Exercise with a friend

Exercise is important for your physical and mental health. Working out with a friend means you’re more likely to have fun and stick to your exercise plan.

How to make exercise fun (slideshow)

Many of us find it difficult to stick to some form of exercise, others don’t know where to start. Experts say the key to taking up or keeping to any form of physical activity is to have fun. Get off...

Pets can make you healthy (video)

Australians have one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world.

Physical activity – choosing the one for you

You are more likely to keep up a healthy lifestyle change if your chosen activity suits you.

Physical activity for men

Many men are only motivated to become more active after they have a health scare.

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Physical activity – overcoming the barriers

If you think physical activity is boring, try exercising with a friend.
Physical activity - staying active during summer (video)
Physical Activity and Fitness Trainer Sherri Bourne gives us some great tips for staying active over the summer months.

Physical activity - staying motivated
Pick an exercise or fitness activity that appeals to you and suits your lifestyle.

Physical activity - what's your excuse?
There are many excuses we can come up with to avoid being active, but the truth is there is always a way to fit some physical activity into your day.

Stretching exercise in winter (video)
When starting out an exercise program, it's really important to do a warm up and cool down before and after exercise.

Exercise safety and injury prevention

10 tips for safe stretching
Make stretching part of your life. 10 tips for safe stretching.

10 tips to exercise safely
Exercising regularly has wide-ranging physical, emotional and social health benefits. You need to exercise safely to remain healthy and injury-free. If it's safe and painless, you're more.

Aerobics - preventing injury
Aerobics injuries are usually caused by trauma and overuse, but can be prevented by using the right techniques and equipment.

Australian rules football - preventing injury
Australian rules football is a physical contact sport that often results in injuries from tackling, kicking, running and constant competition for the ball.

Basketball - health benefits
Basketball is a sport enjoyed by people of all ages and abilities.

Basketball - preventing injury
Basketball is a fast game with frequent and aggressive body contacts. Injuries can and do occur.

Canoeing and kayaking - health benefits
Canoeing and kayaking can be done as a hobby, a competitive sport or as a fun activity on holidays.

Canoeing and kayaking - preventing injury
Careful preparation and the right equipment can help prevent canoeing and kayaking injuries.

Cricket - health benefits
To play cricket you need to be fit and strong and have good hand-eye coordination and ball-handling skills.

Cricket - preventing injury
Cricket is a very popular sport. Injuries are often caused by overuse, being struck by a cricket ball and falls.

Cycling - health benefits
Cycling can help to protect you from serious diseases.

Cycling - preventing injury
You are much more likely to hurt yourself by falling off your bike or hitting a stationary object than colliding with another vehicle.

Dance - health benefits
Dancing can be a fun way to stay fit for people of all ages and abilities.

Dancing - preventing injury
Dancing is fun and a great form of exercise, but make sure you avoid injuries.

Dog walking - the health benefits
If you are planning to buy a dog, make sure you choose a breed that's appropriate to your lifestyle.

Exercise safety
Training too hard or fast is a common cause of sports-related injuries.
• Fishing - preventing injury
  Never go fishing alone? always fish with someone else and, ideally, with two other people...

• Golf - health benefits
  Golf provides a stimulating challenge, combined with a healthy walk in pleasant surroundings.

• Golf - preventing injury
  The average golfer playing an 18-hole game walks about seven kilometres.

• Heat stress and exercise
  Heat stress occurs when sweat can't evaporate fast enough to keep the body sufficiently cool during physical activity.

Healthy eating and exercise

• Food for sport - tucker talk tips
  Carbohydrate is the most important nutrient for athletes.

• Secrets to healthy ageing (slideshow)
  Experts say the key to living well into our 80s and 90s is making a commitment to live healthily. Check out these simple ideas and embrace your senior years!

• Sporting performance and food
  Good nutrition and a healthy diet are essential to improving your sports performance.

• The amount of physical activity you need
  It’s important for your health that you get enough physical activity every day, and that you limit your sedentary behaviour. But getting the amount of physical activity you need doesn’t have to be...

Keeping active throughout life

• 10 tips for active seniors
  Stay independent for longer with regular exercise. 10 tips for active seniors.

• Children – keeping them active
  A young child is naturally active, so build upon their inclinations to use their body.

• Exercise and stretching in the office (video)
  Sitting behind a desk all day doesn't mean you can't exercise.

• Gardens for all – a health activity
  Gardening has many health and therapeutic benefits, and is an activity that most people can enjoy.

• Getting active - tucker talk tips
  The main thing is to choose physical activities that you enjoy and that you can stick to in the long term.

• Healthy active Koori kids - tucker talk tips
  Good nutrition and physical exercise help to keep Koori kids healthy and avoid diseases when they get older.

• Healthy ageing – stay involved
  Reach out to the world around you for fun, a sense of achievement, social contact and mental stimulation.

• Healthy and active ageing
  Being physically active, eating well, socialising and improving your health can help you live a healthy, happy and active life as you get older.

• How to make exercise fun (slideshow)
  Many of us find it difficult to stick to some form of exercise, others don’t know where to start. Experts say the key to taking up or keeping to any form of physical activity is to have fun. Get off...

• How to volunteer and boost your health (slideshow)
  Volunteering is great for our health - it makes us feel good, while helping others in the process.

• Older people in hospital – Get well soon
  Learn about improving and maintaining your health during a hospital stay.
Physical activity is an important part of health and wellbeing, and girls should remain active as they grow up.

Many men are only motivated to become more active after they have a health scare.

Physical activity can help older people maintain independence, recover from illness and reduce their risk of disease.

Physical activity for seniors
Physical activity for seniors – staying active during summer (video)
Physical Activity and Fitness Trainer - Sherri Bourne shares a few easy and low-impact ways for seniors to stay healthy over the summer months.

If you can't make the time to exercise for yourself, do it for your family.

There are many excuses we can come up with to avoid being active, but the truth is there is always a way to fit some physical activity into your day.

Always consult with your doctor or midwife before starting any postnatal exercise program.

Unless you have complications, you should be able to exercise throughout your pregnancy.

Experts say the key to living well into our 80s and 90s is making a commitment to live healthily. Check out these simple ideas and embrace your senior years!

Make sure that some family outings offer opportunities for physical activity, such as playing sport together.

It’s important for your health that you get enough physical activity every day, and that you limit your sedentary behaviour. But getting the amount of physical activity you need doesn’t have to be.

Many sports can be adapted to suit people who are blind or have low vision.

Walking will improve your fitness and reduce your risk of heart disease.

Walking is great exercise for older people. It has a range of health and social benefits, and most people can do it.

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Arthritis and exercise
Exercise can reduce some of the symptoms of arthritis, and improve joint mobility and strength.

Asthma and exercise
Exercise-induced asthma can be prevented with medication and by preparing for exercise and physical activity.

Breathing problems and exercise
A little physical activity and some breathing exercises can help people with lung disease.

Cancer - exercise to help you cope
People with cancer should be as physically active as their abilities and condition allow.

Dementia - reducing your risk
Adopting a ‘brain healthy’ lifestyle may reduce your risk of dementia in later life.

Diabetes - issues for children and teenagers
Many parents worry when their child with diabetes starts or returns to school.
Epilepsy and employment
Many people living with epilepsy are successfully employed across a range of professional fields.

Epilepsy and exercise
It is rare for a person with epilepsy to have a seizure during physical activity, but you should always take safety precautions when exercising.

Exercise and mood
Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise...

Exercise in your local surroundings (video)
Want to exercise, but find gyms boring or expensive? Sue Stanley and Shane Bilsborough team up to show you how to exercise indoors and outdoors using your local surroundings - whether it's running up...

HIV, hepatitis and sport
People with HIV or hepatitis B or C participate in a wide range of sports without restrictions, and the risk of transmission to another player is extremely small.

Menstruation - athletic amenorrhoea
Women who are athletes or who exercise a lot on a regular basis are at risk of developing athletic amenorrhoea, which is the absence of periods.

Osteoporosis and exercise
Exercise can reduce the risk of fractures resulting from osteoporosis by both slowing the rate of bone loss, and reducing the person’s risk of falling by building muscle strength and improving balance.

Sports injuries
A sports injury may be more severe than you think.

Type 2 diabetes - healthy eating and exercise (video)
People with type 2 diabetes talk about positive lifestyle changes that improve their quality of life.

Related Information

- Older people in hospital – Get well soon
  Learn about improving and maintaining your health during a hospital stay.
- Keeping active
  Becoming physically active, safety, types of physical activity and exercise and health conditions.
- Exercise - the low-down on hydration
  You need to drink enough and regularly to keep hydrated during exercise.
- Physical activity - it's important
  Just 30 minutes of moderate activity each day can improve your health and reduce the risk of developing certain conditions or diseases.
- Exercise with a friend
  Exercise is important for your physical and mental health. Working out with a friend means you’re more likely to have fun and stick to your exercise plan.

Related information on other websites

- Adult pre-exercise screening tool, Fitness Australia (pdf).
- Sports Medicine Australia, South Australian Branch – Conditioning/light weights.

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