

How to Start an Exercise Program

10 fitness tips to help you get started with a workout program -- and stick with it.

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It's not enough for us to know that we *should* be exercising to tone our bodies and improve our health. It seems we need specific strategies to help us start an exercise program - and keep it going. Or so say experts who gave WebMD some fitness tips to help motivate exercise beginners or drop-outs.

In fact, a recent study showed that when adults with chronic illnesses were given behavior-changing strategies, they significantly increased their activity levels. That was not the case when they were given information intended to change their knowledge and beliefs about exercise, according to researchers from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Simple, action-oriented strategies are the way to get exercising, says Vicki Conn, professor and associate dean of research in the Missouri University Sinclair School of Nursing. For example, by writing down and tracking your activity over time, you can boost awareness of and motivation for exercise.

Here are more get-moving strategies suggested by Tonya Gutch, senior personal trainer at the Cooper Fitness Center in Dallas:

- 1. Set Specific, Manageable Goals.** For example, plan to exercise for 20 minutes, three times a week. And don't forget to track your progress by writing it down.
- 2. Use a Variety of Daily Reminders.** Schedule your exercise sessions on your calendar like any other appointment. Also make sure you have your gym bag in the car, or leave your walking shoes by the door to remind you to get moving.
- 3. Set Up a Non-Food Reward System.** To reward yourself when you accomplish one of your fitness goals - such as staying on track with your exercise for a full week or month -- treat yourself to a movie, massage, or pedicure.
- 4. Invest in a Good Pair of Workout Shoes.** Make sure they have good cushioning and arch support and feel so good that you'll look forward to putting them on. Sales associates at many of the sports stores can help you find a good pair, say Gutch. She suggests staying away from high-top shoes because too much ankle support over time can actually make the joints weaker.

And don't forget to replace them when the old pair starts to lose their support -- probably about every three to six months, says Gutch. Another option is to buy two pairs of shoes and switch off between them.

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5. Find a Buddy, a Class, or a Group. "Humans desire companionship," says Gutch. When someone is depending on you and striving for the same goals, this helps motivate you. Not only that, it just makes exercise more fun, Gutch says.

6. Start Slowly. Most people try to do too much when they start exercising, says Gutch. It's OK to break up your exercise into segments throughout the day. "Even small quantities of exercise and activity add up to big benefits," says Gutch. She suggests beginning with 10-15 minute chunks of activity, several times daily. Just fit it in whenever you can.

7. Just Walk. One of the easiest ways for most people to work in exercise is to walk. Wearing a pedometer adds extra motivation by keeping you working toward a goal each day. Gutch says this works particularly well for people who have a sit-down job or live a generally sedentary lifestyle. Although you could aim for 10,000-15,000 steps a day, many people will want to start with 5,000 steps or less, and work their way up over time. And you don't need to use weights on your arms or legs when you walk, Gutch says. "Your body should not be doing continuous movement with added weight to the joints," she says.

8. Get Back to Basics. Don't think you need fancy equipment to get a great workout. Gutch believes the gyms of the future will move away from elaborate exercise machines. Fitness trainers are going back to basic equipment like medicine balls, free weights, Swiss balls, and kettle bells.

9. Use Multiple Muscle Groups. When you work more than one muscle group at a time and use full-body movement as much as possible, it takes less time to do a thorough weight-training workout, Gutch says. For example, try doing squats (lower body) combined with dumbbell shoulder presses (upper body). The bonus? "Using full-body movements burns tons of calories in a short amount of time," says Gutch.

10. Use Whatever Gets You Going. Some of us need a little something extra to keep us exercising from week to week. For some, this could be working out with an mp3 player. "iPods have been a big hit with our clients here at the Cooper Fitness Center," says Gutch. For others, it could be listening to books on tape as you walk, or watching favorite TV shows while you use the treadmill or stationary bike. The point is, use whatever gets you going.