

Beginner's Exercise Program/Osteoporosis feature

By Jeff Louderback

Exercise improves cardiovascular health, builds lean muscle, increases flexibility, decreases stress, reduces the risk for disease, lifts your mood and lowers your blood pressure and cholesterol among other benefits. Knowing this, why would you miss a workout?

With good intentions, many Americans embark on a fitness plan to reach their ideal weight and tone their bodies, but often their quest is derailed shortly after it is started. Fortunately, it is never too late to get fit. With motivation, discipline, knowledge and patience, you can improve your lifestyle by starting a fitness program that includes stretching, cardiovascular exercise and weight training. Getting off to a good start can make a positive difference.

“The most dedicated fitness enthusiasts were beginners at one time. Exercise became second nature to them, just like brushing their teeth,” said Mike Spezzano, an exercise physiologist and national health and fitness consultant for the YMCA of the USA in Chicago. “Generally, people who are fit do not exercise because they are healthy; they are healthy because they exercise.”

Before starting an exercise program, especially if you are 40 or older and if you have a risk factor for heart disease, visit your physician for a complete physical. The results can determine guidelines for your fitness plan.

Set sensible goals before starting your fitness program. What do you want to accomplish? Do you want to shed pounds, add muscle, tone your body – or a combination of all three? Do you want to target a specific area of your body? Be sure to write your goals in a journal and monitor your progress through each workout.

“Your goals should not be easy to reach, but they should be realistic, challenging and attainable,” said Kelli Calabrese, an exercise physiologist and director of fitness for eDiets.com, the world's largest online subscription diet, fitness and counseling network. “Remember, it is healthier to lose weight gradually by improving your exercise and eating habits than trying to lose a lot of weight in a short period of time.”

Obviously, sticking to the exercise program once you start will determine whether you will achieve your goals. To help you make exercise a habit, find a fitness center that is near your workplace or home, pick a convenient time of the day to exercise and commit to that time as you do a doctor's appointment and an important meeting at work. Exercising with a partner who can join you at the gym or for other activities like jogging, walking or hiking can help you stick with your fitness plan.

Hiring a certified personal trainer is another way you can keep yourself motivated. The personal trainer can design a workout plan, show you proper technique and form and provide you with inspiration.

“A personal trainer can be the difference between success and failure,” Calabrese said. “Even if you cannot afford a long-term package, starting out with a few sessions can point you in the right direction.”

A good health club, Calabrese says, should offer you a fitness evaluation, ask your goals and expectations, teach you how to use the machines and even recommend a workout plan to follow upon joining.

Aerobic exercise – such as walking, jogging, low and high-impact aerobics and machines like treadmills, elliptical trainers, stationary bikes and stair climbers – help burn calories and bolster your cardiovascular system. Walking is an ideal cardiovascular exercise when you are beginning your fitness program. Taking the stairs at work, walking up an escalator and parking at the far end of the lot are ways you can sneak in additional steps.

Strength training, or weight training, is what increases and maintains lean muscle mass, which boosts your resting metabolic rate allowing you to burn as many as 300-400 calories each day, not counting the calories expended during aerobic exercise.

“Make sure you start with a weight that is comfortable but challenging,” Calabrese said. “If you can’t comfortably do more than eight repetitions (of an exercise), the weight is too heavy. If you can do more than 15 repetitions, the weight is too light.”

Stretching before and after exercising is part of the workout that is often ignored. This, Spezzano says, can lead to injuries of muscles and tendons

“You should warm up before your workout, and cool down after you’re done,” Spezzano said. “Most people think of stretching before they begin a workout, but stretching when you finish your workout may keep your muscles from tightening and may help decrease soreness.”

Soreness, Calabrese says, is one reason why people stop their fitness program in its early stages. Another reason is a lack of patience.

“You will experience the health benefits of exercise before you will see them on a scale or in the mirror,” Calabrese explained. “External physical changes take time to see, but they will definitely come if you stick to your workout plan and eat a balanced diet. The long-term results are worth it.”

SIDEBAR

A debilitating disease resulting from a decrease in bone mass and strength, osteoporosis affects 28 million people in the United States. Though it is more common in women, men

are also at risk for osteoporosis, which is a major cause of bone fractures among seniors. Without a proper calcium-rich diet and regular exercise, the disease causes bones to gradually become porous and fragile. The good news is that you can prevent osteoporosis, and even strengthen bones that show signs of the disease, with weight-bearing exercises.

Though it is unknown exactly how much exercise is needed to retain bone mineral content, it is understood that the less active you are, the more calcium you will lose. For prevention, the National Osteoporosis Foundation recommends resistance training with free weights or weight machines, walking, hiking, stair climbing, dancing, low-impact aerobics, and jogging as well as cycling, downhill and cross country skiing and working out on the treadmill or stationary bike. Swimming and water aerobics can also be effective for maintaining and strengthening bone mass. Though it may not seem like a weight-bearing exercise, swimming requires muscle movement which stresses the bones and promotes growth.

If you have been diagnosed with osteoporosis, it is best to avoid high-impact aerobics, golf, tennis, bowling, jogging, skiing and racquetball because of the stress these activities place on the bones.

Consult with a physician before embarking on an exercise program, especially if you have been diagnosed with osteoporosis or have fractured bones in the past. Inactivity is a leading factor of osteoporosis, so even if you cannot participate in weight-bearing exercises, any exercise is better than no exercise at all.

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