

Fitting Fitness Into Your Lifestyle

By Janet Reese

Continue the holiday gift-giving spirit by giving yourself a gift of daily exercise. Exercise gives you more energy and vitality, makes you look younger and feel better, and helps you live a longer, healthier life.

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, regular physical activity improves your health by reducing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and high blood pressure; helping control weight; helping build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints; and increasing your sense of well-being.

There's a difference between physical activity and exercise. Physical activity is movement in one's daily routine, while exercise is planned physical activity intended to improve physical fitness.

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity preferably all days of the week. But many Americans have little or no physical activity in their daily lives. Planned exercise can fill the gap. Walking, running, swimming, yoga, Pilates and lifting weights are just a few exercise choices that can boost one's activity level and fitness. Team sports and seasonal activities such as skiing and hiking also are valuable forms of exercise.

Finding a Program for You

Every fitness program should begin with a doctor's check-up. Make sure you have no risk factors and then start slowly. One of the fastest ways to become discouraged or injured is to start off by doing too much. If you decide to join a class, start with an easy one. Cardio-kickboxing is not for a beginner but walking and low-impact aerobics are easy ways to start. Gradually increase the amount of exercise and the level of intensity as your fitness level develops.

Make your fitness program fun and convenient by choosing activities that you enjoy and doing them in an environment that makes you feel good. Research shows that an individual will be more likely to initiate and maintain a physically active lifestyle if the activity is enjoyable, can be easily accessed on a regular basis, fits into one's daily schedule, a benefit is perceived, and one feels that he or she is competent in the activity.

Fitness has three aspects: cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility. A well-rounded fitness program includes a mix of aerobic, strength training, and stretching activities. Aerobic exercise develops the heart, lungs, and circulatory system, helping to make the heart stronger and helping to lower cholesterol and blood pressure. Strength training increases muscle strength, endurance, bone density, and prevents muscle loss that occurs with aging. Stretching helps the body maintain the flexibility and health of joints.

Exercise guidelines from the American College of Sports Medicine say to aim for 20-60 minutes of aerobic exercise such as walking, jogging or cycling three to five days a week; 20 minutes of strength training such as lifting weights two to three times a week; and stretching the major muscle groups two to three times a week.

Exercise Your Options

There are many exercise choices and it's likely you will find several that you'll enjoy. If you already have a fitness program in place you may want to expand your program, or try something new. Listed below are just a few types of exercise that you can do on your own or in classes at recreation centers or gyms. Additional resources such as exercise videos and books are available at libraries and bookstores. The "KISS (Keep it Simple Series) Guide to Fitness" and "The Everything Total Fitness Book" are a few helpful books on fitness.

Brisk walking is the number one activity recommended by fitness experts and the most popular form of outdoor fitness activity. Why? It's easy and requires minimal equipment – just a pair of good walking shoes. You don't need to learn a new skill. Walking is gentle on the knees and other joints and puts little stress on soft tissues. Brisk walking also promotes cardiovascular fitness.

Make sure you are walking enough. Many people aren't walking frequently enough or fast enough to realize significant health benefits. For more information on how frequently, fast and far to walk for fitness, see the web site: www.thewalkingsite.com.

Yoga, an ancient science developed in India thousands of years ago, is one of the most widely practiced exercise systems in the world. Yoga means to yoke, to unite, to be whole, and its aim is to unite the body, mind and spirit by moving the body into poses and exercises. Most people are attracted to yoga because its benefits are felt immediately. Yoga relaxes the body, calms the mind and brings greater awareness to one's life. In addition, yoga builds muscle tone and improves flexibility, balance and posture.

While there are many types of yoga, Hatha Yoga is what most people think of as yoga. It involves stretching postures, poses and breathing and balancing exercises that work directly on the body and, in turn, the mind. Yoga does not require you to be in perfect physical shape and anyone can benefit from yoga.

Pilates is a popular form of exercise that can be practiced by people of all ages and at all fitness levels. The exercise regimen developed by German-born fitness guru Joseph H. Pilates (1880-1967) has no impact as in aerobics, but rather focuses on the body's "powerhouse" stomach, hips, lower back and buttocks. Pilates tones muscles and improves posture and flexibility.

There are two main types of Pilates – remedial and pure. Remedial, where all the exercises are done on a simple floor mat, is recommended for beginners. Pure Pilates utilizes a machine called a "reformer" and equipment for a more cardiovascular-based workout. In general, a person will take at least six classes to learn the fundamentals of Pilates.

Cardio-kickboxing classes are a combination of aerobics, boxing and martial arts. If you are looking for a high-intensity workout that will increase your strength and flexibility while burning fat, then cardio-kickboxing may be for you. Kickboxing classes can be a great alternative for people who already are reasonably fit and have become bored with aerobics, brisk walking or jogging on a treadmill. They also provide an option for people who enjoy the "semi-dance" movements found in aerobics or step classes.

Spinning may be for you if you enjoy cycling. It's a type of aerobic exercise that is performed on specially designed stationary bikes. Originally, spinning was created by a world-class cyclist "Jonny G" as a method of training for bicycle races. Spinning is performed in a class-like atmosphere with motivating music. The instructor guides participants through a cycling workout over imaginary hills and through valleys, varying the pedaling pace and intensity. Spinning is an excellent calorie burner, using about 600 calories in an hour. Also, it tones and shapes quadriceps.

Trainers' Tips

Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist Adam Bratten says:

- Make exercise a priority and schedule it in your day as you would a business meeting.
- Don't exercise solely to lose weight. You'll be more likely to continue exercising if you do it for long-term health and fitness.

- Work with a competent personal trainer. A trainer can get you started exercising and give you the tools needed to continue exercising for a lifetime.
- Proper resistance training – a component of strength training -- is a must in your workout program if you want to build muscle and increase bone integrity. Resistance training can be cardio-intensive if done appropriately.
- Realize that exercise requires effort. There will be highs and lows as well as many rewards.

Certified Personal Trainer Ken “Bird” Yarbrough says:

- Set realistic times and days to exercise and then follow through with your plan. Exercise with a partner to help keep your commitment.
- Take free or low-cost orientation classes on exercise facilities and programs offered at local recreation centers and gyms.
- In order to make progress and improve your fitness, change your exercises every few weeks. Varying your workout is the best way to combat boredom, burnout and injury.
- Don’t compete with others in the gym; work on your individual program.
- Learn as much as you can about fitness through reliable sources. Muscle magazines aren’t the best resources. You can tap videos, books and tapes in the library or bookstore.

Rather than making a resolution to exercise in the New Year, give yourself the gifts of health, fitness and well-being by exercising. Choose among the many exercise options to find a fitness program that is fun and convenient, and enjoy the rewards!

Janet Reese is a freelance writer and fitness enthusiast who enjoys running, swimming and cycling for aerobic conditioning, yoga for flexibility and weight lifting for strength. Her favorite activities are hiking and skiing.

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