HEALTH BASICS

Physical activity

Physical activity is any body movement that uses energy, from daily tasks to planned exercise.

WHAT IT IS
Body movement that uses more energy than resting

WHERE IT COMES UP
Daily routines, exercise plans, healthcare visits and activity trackers

WHY IT MATTERS
Supports physical function, mental wellbeing and long-term health

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
A primary care clinician or qualified exercise professional

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Activity records, questionnaires, trackers or fitness assessments

Overview

Physical activity means any movement made by your muscles that uses energy. It includes walking, cycling, active play, household tasks, manual work, dancing, sport and planned exercise.

Exercise is one type of physical activity. It is planned and usually repeated to improve or maintain fitness. A brisk walk taken for exercise and walking to a bus stop are both physical activity, even though only one may feel like a workout.

Physical activity is not a disease or diagnosis. It is one part of health, alongside sleep, nutrition, medical care and your physical and social environment.

Activity can be light, moderate or vigorous. At moderate intensity, you breathe faster but can usually still talk. At vigorous intensity, breathing is harder and you may only manage a few words before pausing. The same task can feel moderate to one person and vigorous to another.

Sedentary behaviour is time spent sitting, reclining or lying down while awake and using little energy. Someone can meet an exercise target and still spend much of the day sitting. These are related but separate parts of health.

How it works

When you move, your muscles need more energy. Your heart beats faster and your breathing increases to deliver oxygen and fuel. Repeated activity helps your body become more efficient at meeting these demands.

Different activities train different abilities:

Physical activity does not have to happen in a gym. Short periods of movement during travel, work, housework or recreation all count toward your total activity.

Your response is shaped by your current fitness, age, health conditions, medicines, disability, pregnancy status and the activity itself. A safe and useful level of effort is therefore personal. Fitness trackers can estimate movement, heart rate or energy use, but their figures are not exact medical measurements.

- Aerobic activity works large muscle groups and raises your breathing and heart rate, such as brisk walking, swimming or cycling
- Muscle-strengthening activity makes muscles work against resistance, such as lifting weights, using resistance bands or doing body-weight exercises
- Balance activity challenges your ability to stay steady, such as tai chi or supported balance exercises
- Flexibility activity moves joints through their available range, such as stretching

Why it matters for your health

Regular physical activity helps maintain heart and lung fitness, muscle strength, balance, bone health and the ability to manage everyday tasks. It can also support sleep, mood and thinking skills.

Over time, being active is associated with a lower risk of several conditions, including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. It can help with blood pressure, blood sugar and weight management, although body weight is influenced by many factors. Benefits can occur even when weight does not change.

Activity can also be part of managing long-term conditions. The most suitable type and amount may need adjustment for arthritis, heart or lung disease, diabetes, neurological conditions, chronic pain or disability.

Public health guidance generally recommends that adults work toward 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week, or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous activity, or an

equivalent combination. Adults are also advised to include muscle-strengthening activity on at least two days each week. Older adults may benefit from adding activities that challenge balance.

These are population targets, not a pass-or-fail test. Some activity is better than none, and people who are inactive can start with small amounts. Children, adolescents, pregnant people and people with certain health conditions have specific recommendations.

What can go wrong

Physical activity is generally safe, but the activity, setting or level of effort can create problems.

Muscle soreness may occur after an unfamiliar activity. Strains, sprains, tendon injuries, falls and fractures can happen, especially when effort increases too quickly, equipment is unsuitable or the environment is unsafe.

Hot or humid conditions can contribute to dehydration, heat exhaustion or heat stroke. Cold weather can increase the risk of cold-related injury. Air pollution may worsen breathing problems in some people.

Activity can trigger symptoms from an existing condition. Examples include exercise-induced narrowing of the airways, low blood sugar in someone using certain diabetes medicines, abnormal heart rhythms, angina from reduced blood flow to the heart, or dizziness related to blood pressure.

Arrange routine medical follow-up if activity repeatedly causes joint pain, unusual fatigue, wheezing, dizziness, palpitations or breathlessness that seems out of proportion to the effort. A clinician can assess whether a health condition, medicine or injury needs attention.

Stop the activity and seek urgent medical advice for a significant injury, worsening breathing difficulty or symptoms that do not settle with rest.

Call emergency services for chest pressure or pain, fainting, severe trouble breathing, sudden weakness on one side, new difficulty speaking, or confusion and collapse during heat exposure. These symptoms can be signs of a medical emergency rather than a normal response to exercise.

What you can do

Choose movement that fits your abilities, interests, surroundings and available time. Starting

with a manageable amount can make activity easier to continue. You can gradually add time, frequency or intensity rather than changing everything at once.

A simple activity record can help you see your usual pattern. Record the activity, duration and how hard it felt. A phone, watch or step counter may help, but you do not need a device.

Use the talk test to estimate intensity. During moderate activity, you can usually talk but not sing. During vigorous activity, speaking more than a few words is difficult. Stop if the effort causes concerning symptoms.

Ask a primary care clinician or qualified exercise professional about suitable activity if you have a long-term condition, disability, recent surgery or injury, or if you are pregnant and unsure how to adapt your routine. Useful questions include:

Most people do not need a fitness test before beginning light activity such as comfortable walking. A test may be recommended when symptoms, medical history or plans for intense exercise raise a specific concern.

Warm up by beginning at an easier pace. Use suitable footwear or protective equipment where needed, and pay attention to weather, lighting, traffic and surfaces. Drink according to thirst during ordinary activity; longer or hotter sessions may require more planning.

- Are there movements or intensity levels I should modify?
- Could my medicines affect exercise, hydration, heart rate or blood sugar?
- Would physiotherapy, cardiac rehabilitation or another supervised service help?
- Do I need a blood sugar, blood pressure or symptom plan during activity?

Common questions

Do short periods of activity count?

Yes. Physical activity can be accumulated in short periods. Taking stairs, walking during a break or doing a few minutes of strengthening work can contribute to your total.

Is walking enough?

Walking can provide useful aerobic activity, particularly when the pace raises your breathing rate. It does not train every aspect of fitness, so strength and balance activities may also be useful.

Do I have to feel sore afterward?

No. Soreness is not required for activity to be effective. Mild soreness after unfamiliar exercise can occur, but sharp pain, major swelling or loss of function needs attention.

Can household tasks count?

Yes, if they involve body movement and energy use. Their intensity depends on the task and how much effort it requires for you.

Is a step target necessary?

No single step target suits everyone. Step counts can help track walking, but they miss activities such as cycling, swimming and some strength exercises. Changes from your own usual level may be more useful than treating one number as mandatory.

Should I exercise when unwell?

Rest may be appropriate during fever, vomiting, significant breathing symptoms or an acute illness. Return gradually as you recover. Seek medical advice if you have chest symptoms, marked breathlessness or uncertainty related to a health condition.

Sources

- World Health Organization. WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour . 2020.
- US Department of Health and Human Services. Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans , second edition. 2018.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Measuring Physical Activity Intensity .
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Benefits of Physical Activity .
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Physical Activity and Exercise During Pregnancy and the Postpartum Period . Committee Opinion No. 804, 2020.