

# Q. How much exercise do I need to stay healthy?

**A.** The body needs a minimum amount of exercise to stimulate the heart, arteries, bones, muscles, and metabolism to maintain good health. Without this stimulation, the muscles, bones, and heart will all deteriorate over time. Your body will also accumulate excess fat.

The research is clear: People who don't exercise regularly are more subject to early development of chronic diseases (diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, osteoporosis, and cancer) that can lead to early death. Researchers studied more than 4,000 healthy people for nearly 9 years. They found that people who got very little if any exercise (the poorest fitness group, bottom 20%) had a relative risk of mortality 4 times greater than those who exercised the most and were the most fit (rated in the top 20% for fitness).<sup>1</sup>

The research is also clear about how much you need to exercise to meet minimal fitness objectives. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) makes this recommendation for meeting the body's minimal needs for good health in their recent national guidelines:

- ✓ 30 minutes of moderate activity (equivalent to walking briskly) at least 5 times per week.

OR

- ✓ 20-30 minutes of vigorous activity (equivalent to jogging a 10- to 12-minute mile) 3 times a week.

Or a combination of the two.

The ACSM further recommends muscle-strengthening exercises at least twice weekly. For people age 55 and older, they specifically recommend stretching exercises at least 2-3 times weekly to maintain flexibility.

The ACSM also points out that if you get more exercise than this minimum amount, you'll derive even more benefit, such as:

- Further help in maintaining a healthy weight
- Higher fitness levels for improved physical ability, endurance, and productivity



- Lower risk of diabetes and cancer
- Lower risk of early mortality overall

For example, the American Cancer Society recommends that people do moderate physical activities for an hour daily for lowest risk of cancer.

To minimize risk and to improve safety, the ACSM exercise guidelines also recommend:

If you are a healthy man or woman (with no symptoms of disease) and plan to be physically active at a moderate-intensity level, you do not need to consult a physician or healthcare provider before you begin – unless you have specific medical questions.

If you are symptomatic or have cardiovascular disease, diabetes, other active chronic disease, or any medical concerns, consult a physician or healthcare provider prior to any substantial increase in your physical activity, particularly vigorous-intensity activity.

For best success in long-term fitness:

- Choose activities that are within your capacity for your present age, weight, and fitness ability. Overexertion results in sore muscles. It hurts – and you probably won't want to continue regular activity.
- Choose activities that you enjoy doing. If you don't like it, you won't keep it up.
- Get a friend or family member to join you. Social support is very helpful in improving regularity in exercise.
- Set goals, keep daily records, track your progress, and reward yourself for reaching your goals.
- Wear a pedometer. It is a proven way to encourage walking and long term improvement in your fitness level. Work up gradually to 7-8,000 steps daily for minimal fitness. For best health – aim for 10,000 steps daily!

*References:*

1. Sandra Mandic, et al. *Characterizing differences in mortality at the low end of the fitness spectrum. Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise. 2009; 41:1573-1579.*
2. Haskell W, et al. *Physical activity and public health: updated recommendations for adults from the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association. Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise. 2007 Aug; 39:1423-1434.*

