

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a wonderful new Web site available on the new food pyramid, <http://mypyramid.gov>. There is even a special section designed for children 6-11 with information and interactive games. Not only does this site discuss nutrition and the foods important to adults and children, it discusses physical activity.

This article will focus on the physical activity aspects of the site and just excerpt some of the information available. Please visit the site for a more comprehensive overview of physical activity.

WHAT IS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY? For health benefits, physical activity should be **moderate** or **vigorous** and add up to at least 30 minutes a day.

Moderate physical activities include:

- Walking briskly (about 3 ½ miles per hour)
- Hiking
- Gardening/yard work
- Dancing
- Golf (walking and carrying clubs)
- Bicycling (less than 10 miles per hour)
- Weight training (general light workout)

Vigorous physical activities include:

- Running/jogging (5 miles per hour)
- Bicycling (more than 10 miles per hour)
- Swimming (freestyle laps)
- Aerobics
- Walking very fast (4 ½ miles per hour)
- Heavy yard work, such as chopping wood
- Weight lifting (vigorous effort)
- Basketball (competitive)

WHY IS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IMPORTANT? Being physically active is a key element in living a longer, healthier, happier life. It can help relieve stress and can provide an overall feeling of well-being. Physical activity can also help you achieve and maintain a healthy weight and lower the risk for chronic disease. The benefits of physical activity may include:

- Improves self-esteem and feelings of well-being
- Increases fitness level
- Helps build and maintain bones, muscles, and joints
- Builds endurance and muscle strength
- Enhances flexibility and posture
- Helps manage weight
- Lowers risk of heart disease, colon cancer, and type 2 diabetes
- Helps control blood pressure
- Reduces feeling of depression and anxiety

HOW MUCH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IS NEEDED?

At a minimum, do *moderate* intensity activity for 30 minutes most days, or preferably every day. This is in addition to your usual daily activities. Increasing the intensity or the amount of time of activity can have additional health benefits and may be needed to control body weight.

While 30 minutes a day of moderate intensity physical activities provide health benefits, being active for longer or doing more vigorous activities can provide even greater health benefits. They also use up more calories per hour. No matter what activity you choose, it can be done all at once, or divided into two or three parts during the day. Even 10-minute bouts of activity count toward your total.

TIPS FOR INCREASING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**At home:**

- Join a walking group in the neighborhood or at the local shopping mall. Recruit a partner for support and encouragement.
- Push the baby in a stroller.
- Get the whole family involved – enjoy an afternoon bike ride with your kids.
- Walk up and down the soccer or softball field sidelines while watching the kids play.
- Walk the dog – don't just watch the dog walk.
- Clean the house or wash the car.
- Walk, skate or cycle more and drive less.
- Do stretches, exercises, or pedal a stationary bike while watching television.
- Mow the lawn with a push mower.
- Plant and care for a vegetable or flower garden.
- Play with the kids – tumble in the leaves, build a snowman, splash in a puddle, or dance to favorite music.

At work:

- Get off the bus or subway one stop early and walk or skate the rest of the way.
- Replace a coffee break with a brisk 10-minute walk. Ask a friend to go with you.
- Take part in an exercise program at work or a nearby gym.
- Join the office softball or bowling team.

At play:

- Walk, jog, skate or cycle.
- Swim or do water aerobics.
- Take a class in martial arts, dance, or yoga.
- Golf (pull cart or carry clubs).
- Canoe, row, or kayak.
- Play racket ball, tennis, or squash.
- Ski cross-country or downhill.
- Play basketball, softball, or soccer.
- Hand cycle or play wheelchair sports.
- Take a nature walk
- Most important – have fun while being active!