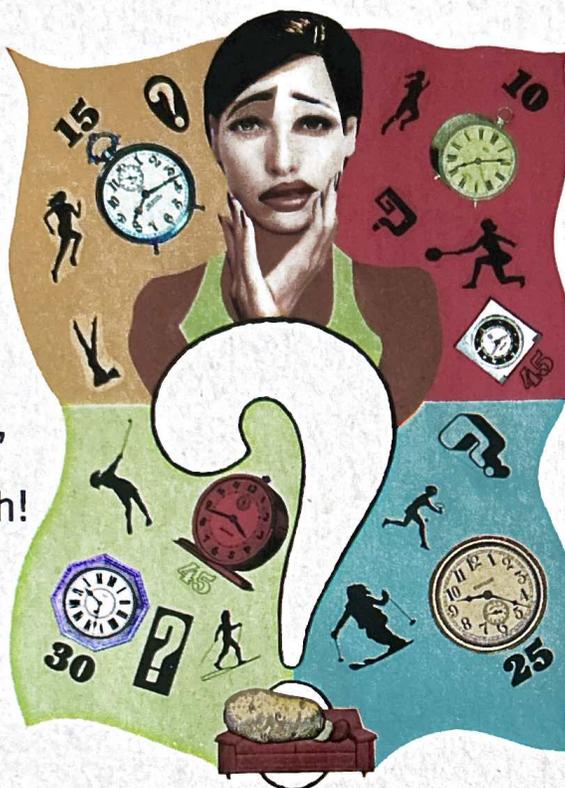


How Much Exercise Do You Need— Really?

Hard, lite, a little, a lot...the workout rules are so confusing, it's enough to make you head for the couch! How to know what's right for you.



by Judith Zimmer

Exercise never used to be a problem for me. I took an aerobics class or went running three times a week, and that was pretty much that. But not anymore. For one thing, ever since becoming a mom, I haven't had time to work out as regularly. For another, I'm not even sure I *need* to. Walking to the bank or playing basketball with my 6-year-old son may do me as much good as a sweaty half hour on the treadmill—or so I've heard.

The key word here is *may*. There have been so many recommendations from groups ranging from the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) that, like many people, I'm confused about what kind of exercise and how much to do. Previously, it was widely believed that vigorous aerobic exercise was the only kind that paid off—20 to 60 minutes at least three times a week, the experts stressed. But more recent reports have indicated that moderate exercise—like walking briskly for half an hour—may be more beneficial than once thought. And you don't even have to do it in a single session; three

10-minute bouts during the course of a day are fine.

Those who write the rules acknowledge that it's all a little murky. "Our guidelines were geared to two totally different types of people—sedentary and active," says Michael Pollock, Ph.D., director of the Center for Exercise Science at the University of Florida, Gainesville. "And that wasn't made clear." Pollock, who's rewriting the new ACSM guidelines, due out this spring, explains that the question of how much and how vigorously you should exercise depends largely on where you are on the health/fitness curve.

It might help to picture the curve as a slope, actually. If you're a basic couch potato, at the low end of the slope, you can significantly cut your risk of disease by doing some moderate-level physical activity for 30 minutes several times a week—even if those minutes aren't consecutive. "This sort of moderate-level exercise, unlike the heavy variety, may not improve your fitness or aerobic capacity, but it *will* improve your health; doing something is always better than doing nothing," says Pollock. As you

grow healthier and feel better, you may want to edge your way up the slope. The higher you go, the more benefits you get.

If you think about it, this advice doesn't really contradict the earlier edicts; it is simply telling a sedentary group of people to get moving. As the first-ever Surgeon General's Report on physical fitness and health warned in 1996, an alarming number of Americans are in danger of dying prematurely, mainly because they don't move around enough. The same report said that more than half of all Americans are not regularly active, and one quarter aren't active at all. Public-health officials want Americans to know that inactivity is extremely hazardous to their health—and that even moderate exercise on a regular basis brings a host of benefits, including reducing the risk of heart

disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, colon cancer, depression, and anxiety. It also helps boost immunity; control weight; and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints. "It was good to be able to tell people they didn't have to run a marathon to be healthy," says Jody Wilkinson, M.D., research physician at the Cooper Institute for Aerobic Research in Dallas.

Unfortunately, many Americans who weren't sedentary but *were* over-extended—trying to juggle work, home, and families—jumped on the Surgeon General's report (and others like it) as a reason to exercise less. "They cut back on physical activity because it didn't seem you had to do that much to stay fit," says Paul Williams, Ph.D., a scientist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in Berkeley, CA. "These days, people have so many time pressures on them, it's hard to schedule real workout sessions. So the report seemingly offered a good excuse to ease up."

Buried in the report, however, was an important message: Don't think that by doing ten minutes here or there you'll see the same kind of benefits you get by exercising vigorously. Some experts feel this

fact was purposely played down because health officials believed the push toward longer, harder workouts had made many Americans feel so overwhelmed, they just caved in and did nothing. "The government's decision to emphasize moderate exercise was made on the basis of what was palatable to the general public rather than on a scientific one," says Williams. "If you look at all the major studies, you'll see that the more vigorous the exercise, the greater the gain."

Exercise researcher Peter Wood, professor emeritus at Stanford University School of Medicine in Palo Alto, CA, agrees. "A moderate amount of exercise will produce a moderate amount of good," he says. "Someone who's doing gardening and walking isn't going to do as well as someone who's running twenty miles a week."

Williams also points out that the leaner you are—at a healthy weight, with low body fat—the healthier you are. Vigorous exercise helps you achieve that objective. Again, this isn't to say moderate exercise does you no good—just that you have to be realistic about what you want to accomplish.

What's the difference between vigor-

ous and moderate exercise? Basically, a vigorous workout is one that makes you sweat and breathe harder, whereas moderate activity like walking, housekeeping, or gardening probably won't make you do either. But these terms are somewhat relative. Vigorous exercise for an older person isn't the same as vigorous exercise for a 20- or 30-year-old. Also, the definition may vary from study to study.

If you're already active, and want to become even more so, many experts say it's better to work out harder than longer. In the National Runners' Health Study, a report on 10,000 runners, Williams found that increasing speed—not distance—was the key to further lowering blood pressure. "If time is limited, go for greater intensity," he says. "It's also the way to expend more calories in the time you have."

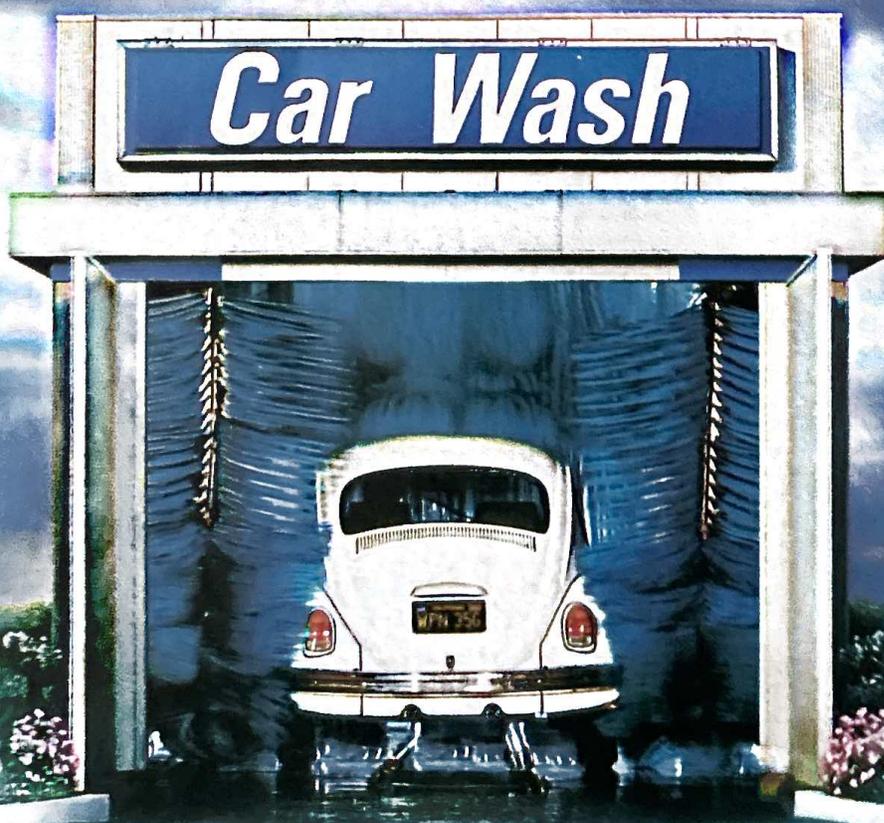
Is there such a thing as overdoing it? As long as you have an okay from your doctor, increase the amount of exercise gradually, and never push so hard that you get injured, you should be fine.

Indeed, many people love to challenge their bodies. Linda Kansorka, 46, an administrative office manager in Denver, joined a health club for the first time six years ago—and hasn't stopped

going since. She's shed 30 pounds and slimmed down from a size 18 to a 12. She has also found that sweating through a workout is as good for her mind as it is for her body. "You put everything you have into that workout and give it your all; it makes you feel wonderful," says Kansorka, who works out five days a week at the gym. "They ought to get rid of Prozac and make women exercise."

Feeling just as good but at the other end of the health/fitness slope—at least for now—is Elisabeth Benfey. The 31-year-old New York City mother of two took step classes before having kids, but now finds the workouts too strenuous; instead, she tries to get to the pool three times a week. Benfey has discovered that swimming is a "Zenlike" exercise that's peaceful and meditative, and gives her some much needed time to herself. "I used to be very concerned with weight loss, but now I'm looking for health and to feel good," she says.

Doing what makes you feel good is the key to staying motivated, say fitness professionals. They want us to make exercise a regular habit, not to burden us with so many numbers and requirements that we get demoralized and wind up doing noth-



Surrounds
and cleans.

ing. Nor do they want exercise to become an additional stress in and of itself.

As part of this unburdening, some experts would have us get rid of numbers altogether. "If you're supposed to be doing twenty minutes on the treadmill and you only have fifteen—do that," says Molly Fox, creative fitness director of Equinox Fitness Clubs in New York City. "It's not as if there's any magic number. The more you work your body, the better off you're going to be."

Fox also points out that these days, there are more ways than ever to be active. Consider a softball or volleyball game with the kids, or a family bike ride. "Exercise is more than just being on the StairMaster," she says.

Remember, too, that finding an activity that's right for you begins with who you are—your health, family history, lifestyle interests, and goals. "Exercise is not a one-size-fits-all thing," says James Rippe, M.D., associate professor at the Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston and one of the country's leading experts on exercise. "You have to ask yourself, 'What am I trying to accomplish? What is my goal?' The kind of exercise you choose, and how much you do of it, will be deter-

mined by your answer."

These days, I'm grateful for lite exercise. It's loosened me up and released me from thinking about exercise in terms of set time limits. In the past, I never would have considered working out if I didn't

have at least an hour. But now I'll jump rope or hop on a stationary bike whenever I get a chance, just to keep moving. And I'm finding that the more I do, the better I feel, and the more I want to do. Definitely, I'm on my way back up that slope. ★

Pick Your Goal—and Go for It!

Regular workouts are the key to better health. They can even help you like your looks, since exercise can dramatically alter the shape of your body. Here, expert advice on how to achieve the following benefits:

✓ There are two ways to slash your risk of **HEART DISEASE**. One is to do moderate activity—brisk walking, housework, or leisurely cycling—for 30 minutes on most days of the week. The other is to aim for more vigorous workouts—running, aerobic dancing, tennis—for at least 20 minutes at least three days a week. The more often you exercise and the higher the intensity, the bigger the benefit.

✓ According to one well-regarded study, spending four or more hours per week swimming, walking, jogging, or playing tennis may halve your risk of developing **BREAST CANCER**. Even one to three hours per week have proved beneficial. Regular workouts may also protect against **COLON AND ENDOMETRIAL CANCERS**.

✓ Reduce your risk of **OSTEOPOROSIS** by doing weight-bearing exercise—walking, running, or lifting weights—for 20 to 30 minutes twice a week.

✓ To **LOSE WEIGHT**, spend 30 to 45 minutes swimming, cycling, or running three to five days a week. Incorporate 15 minutes of strength training into your routine three times a week; this will help boost the rate at which your body burns calories.

✓ To **CHANGE THE SHAPE OF YOUR BODY**, follow the above advice, but be sure to work all the major muscle groups of your body—the front and rear thighs, midsection, lower back, shoulders, chest, upper back, biceps, triceps, and calves. Do eight to 12 repetitions for each body part, and choose weights that you're able to lift at least eight times. (Don't make it too simple, though; your goal is to pump iron until your muscles are fatigued.)

—Deborah Pike

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and cleans.

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