A Report of the Surgeon General

Physical Activity and Health

Women

Key Messages

- Physical activity need not be strenuous to achieve health benefits.
- Women of all ages benefit from a moderate amount of physical activity, preferably daily. The same moderate amount of activity can be obtained in longer sessions of moderately intense activities (such as 30 minutes of brisk walking) as in shorter sessions of more strenuous activities (such as 15–20 minutes of jogging).
- Additional health benefits can be gained through greater amounts of physical activity. Women who can maintain a regular routine of physical activity that is of longer duration or of greater intensity are likely to derive greater benefit. However, excessive amounts of activity should be avoided, because risk of injury increases with greater amounts of activity, as does the risk of menstrual abnormalities and bone weakening.
- Previously sedentary women who begin physical activity programs should start with short intervals (5–10 minutes) of physical activity and gradually build up to the desired level of activity.
- Women with chronic health problems, such as heart disease, diabetes, or obesity, or who are at high risk for these conditions should first consult a physician before beginning a new program of physical activity. Women over age 50 who plan to begin a new program of ***vigorous*** physical activity should first consult a physician to be sure they do not have heart disease or other health problems.
- The emphasis on moderate amounts of physical activity makes it possible to vary activities to meet individual needs, preferences, and life circumstances.

Facts

- More than 60 percent of U.S. women do not engage in the recommended amount of physical activity.
- More than 25 percent of U.S. women are not active at all.
- Physical inactivity is more common among women than men.
- Social support from family and friends has been consistently and positively related to regular physical activity.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

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Benefits of Physical Activity

- Reduces the risk of dying from coronary heart disease and of developing high blood pressure, colon cancer, and diabetes.
- Helps maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints.
- Helps control weight, build lean muscle, and reduce body fat.
- Helps control joint swelling and pain associated with arthritis.
- May enhance the effect of estrogen replacement therapy in decreasing bone loss after menopause.
- Reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression and fosters improvements in mood and feelings of well-being.
- Can help reduce blood pressure in some women with hypertension.

What Communities Can Do

- Provide environmental inducements to physical activity, such as safe, accessible, and attractive trails for walking and bicycling, and sidewalks with curb cuts.
- Open schools for community recreation, form neighborhood watch groups to increase safety, and encourage malls and other indoor or protected locations to provide safe places for walking in any weather.
- Encourage employers to provide supportive worksite environments and policies that offer opportunities for employees to incorporate moderate physical activity into their daily lives.
- Provide community-based programs to meet the needs of older women, women with disabilities, women of racial and ethnic minority groups, and women with low incomes. Include child care arrangements to encourage the participation of women with children.
- Encourage health care providers to talk routinely to female patients about incorporating physical activity into their lives.

For more information contact:

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