

What Exercise Can Do for You

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As you read the introduction to this article, apply the strategies that you just learned. Look for details that support the main idea “What’s so great about exercise?”

What’s so great about exercise? “It gives me energy,” says Brinley, a member of the Junior Olympic Diving Team. “Instead of always being tired, I’m more awake and can focus on my school work better.”

Albee, a 15-year-old football player who lifts weights in the off-season, admits that pregame workouts and scrimmages tire him out. But, he says, “I feel a lot stronger and I’m a better player, especially since I started weightlifting.”

Beth, a ninth grader, plays field hockey and lacrosse. She says that exercise helps her look and feel better and gives her a chance to be on a team with her friends. “It gives us a chance to work toward a common goal,” she says.

Shaping Up

We all know we should exercise: It’s good for the heart, can help keep your weight under control, and might even help you live longer. Studies show, however, that as teenagers get older, they exercise less. Few can run a mile in under 10 minutes. Fewer still get the recommended 30 minutes of **moderate** exercise three or more times a week. In fact, as the use of computers and technology continues to grow, many teenagers are exercising little more than their fingers, tapping away at the keyboard.

It takes effort to make exercise a habit, but those who invest the time and energy are seldom disappointed. “Our coach makes us do a half-hour workout before we get into the pool,” says Brinley, a high school sophomore. “We do sit-ups, run stairs, do crunches, and stretch. That’s what helped me get stronger, build more **endurance**, and stay loose and limber. I think it’s also made me a better diver.”

Brinley has the right idea. Just participating in a sport doesn’t automatically get you into shape. To really get fit, you have to develop each component of fitness – **cardiovascular** endurance, muscle **strength**, and flexibility. For that, a combination of aerobics, stretching, and strengthening exercises works best.

Reducing Risk

Fitness experts say that nearly half of all young people ages 12 to 21 aren’t active enough. That can lead to problems later in life, including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis (thin, brittle bones that break easily), and even early death. What’s more, a couch-potato lifestyle is harder to change the older you get.

Besides reducing your risk of these diseases, regular exercise can help you in smaller ways, too, such as helping you bounce back quicker from a cold and boosting **metabolism** so that you burn more calories. A healthy heart, stronger bones, and a trim and toned body, however, are just the *physical* benefits of exercise. Even more important is what it does for your mood and your mind.

“Exercise makes me feel better about myself and about the way I look,” says Brinley. “I can even see my muscles. I always feel better after diving practice. I’m more confident, too – not just about diving, but about everything.”

Finding an exercise that's fun is the key to getting something out of it. If lessons or team sports aren't your thing, try other activities that you think you might enjoy more. "Five years of Karate made me a lot more **flexible**," says Rachel, "but it was boring. What I really like is step aerobics. I always leave the class feeling energized and stronger."

Fitting Exercise In

Even if you're not into sports, you can still find ways to sneak in a little extra physical activity wherever you can. Walk the dog, take the stairs instead of escalators, ride your bike to school. You won't be sorry. Here are some other ideas:

- Plan some fun into your schedule – a couple sets of tennis, a game of volleyball, a leisurely jog or hike along a trail.
- Shovel snow for a great heart-strengthening activity. (Builds your biceps, too, if you lift and toss it.)
- Vacuum, sweep, and scrub around the house (preferably with the stereo playing in the background).
- Help out in the yard raking leaves, or weeding and planting, depending on the season.

Exercise that's fun is exercise you'll stick with. In addition to possibly concentrating on developing a single skill, like sinking baskets or executing a perfect dive, think about all the things exercise can do for you – and go for it. You'll condition your heart and lungs, build strong muscles, make your tendons and ligaments supple, and maintain a healthy weight. What's more, you'll feel great. Take it from Brinley: "Even if I never make it to the Olympics, I won't ever stop doing exercise," she says. "It feels too good."