In the past 40 years, researchers have studied the effects of exercise on human anatomy and physiology. The overwhelming conclusions show that exercise is not merely good, it is virtually necessary to maintain proper function of physiological systems. More recently, much research has focused on the so-called obesity epidemic, and it has become very clear that physical exercise can play a positive role in the prevention of weight gain and treatment of a range of medical conditions. Exercise is considered an investment in long-term health and wellness.

The human genome is programmed for activity. The body is designed to move and burn calories. Everything we eat contains calories, and everything we do uses calories, including sleeping, breathing, and digesting food. Any physical activity in addition to what you normally do will use extra calories. Experts recommend that we do 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic activity three or more times a week. Moderate-intensity physical activity should be done at least five times a week.¹

**Exercise Benefits**

Research has found that regular exercise helps to control weight and also reduces the effects of coronary heart disease, hypertension, and a number of cancers, diabetes, and osteoporosis. Although there is less evidence to support that there is a positive relationship between exercise and psychological wellbeing, literature does suggest that exercise correlates with improved quality of life and mood states.² ³

Physical activity is body movement produced by skeletal muscles. Any movement activity requires energy expenditure. Exercise is a subset of physical activity that is planned, structured, and repetitive and includes exercise classes and weight training. However, activities carried out as part of normal daily life, such as walking, climbing stairs, and gardening, also count. So do leisure activities such as dancing and swimming. There are thousands of ways to move our bodies. Good benefits can come from alternatives to running on a treadmill.

Some people live for the gym, while others find the thought dreadful. Certainly, if the activity isn’t enjoyable, motivation will quickly wane, and it will become increasingly easy to find an excuse not to work out. Of course, no matter how much we enjoy an exercise routine, it can also become boring, and we may lose interest.

Changing our activities does more than relieve boredom. By switching exercise routines, the body broadens physical abilities. The body thrives on new experiences, and muscles develop better when pushed to new limits with new exercises.

**Choosing the Right Activity**

There are several alternative physical activities that provide significant benefits of exercise. When considering which activities to do, bear in mind the staples of health and wellness and choose activities that promote cardiovascular health, strength, and flexibility. It is not so much what we do, but that we keep moving. Sometimes the thought of changing into workout clothes can seem like climbing a mountain. However, if we keep it simple and decide to just do a few minutes of anything, we start to feel more energetic and are encouraged to keep trying.

Many of us exercise or work out only when we are trying to get in shape or lose weight. However, the value of moving the body goes far beyond traditional weight loss benefits. And, we do not necessarily need an expensive gym membership or hours of fitness training to make an impact.

We can choose activities that require very little preparation, like walking, gardening, or some gentle stretching. Or, we can go to the park or playground. Swing with a small child or chase a pet. Throw a Frisbee. Do things that are fun!

Remember the fun of riding a bike, jumping rope, rowing on the pond, or playing in the pool?

Working out in the pool is good exercise, and, if swimming laps seems to like torture, consider water aerobics. Water fitness requires use of our core muscles and the continuous resistance forces us to engage more muscle fibers through a larger range of motion that improves tone.

Stair climbing can be a great workout. Taking the stairs at any speed provides a lot of benefits. Climbing stairs burns calories, which can help us better manage our weight, improve strength, and
Studies continue to support physical activity as beneficial across several physical and mental-health outcomes. For example, aerobic exercises—including jogging, swimming, cycling, walking, gardening, and dancing—have been proven to reduce anxiety and depression. These improvements in mood are proposed to be caused by an exercise-induced increase in blood circulation to the brain and by an influence on the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and, thus, on the physiological reactivity to stress.

As little as 30 minutes of movement a day can promote weight loss, improve strength and flexibility, and enhance well-being. Anything that gets people off the couch and burning calories has good benefits. Remember to drink lots of water. No matter what we do for exercise, the body needs water to stay hydrated.

Making lifestyle and behavior changes is not easy. It takes time and effort, and there will be setbacks. But over time, we will start to gain physical and mental health benefits as well as improve our physical performance. Making even small changes in the way we move can be meaningful. It is a way to reduce stress, lift our mood, and help us sleep better. Exercise can keep us looking, and feeling, younger throughout our lives. The key is making it part of a daily routine.

References

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