

Physical activity – the way to better heart health

It's fun, free and widely available. It's also a "wonder medicine", according to Adjunct Professor Trevor Shilton, the director of active living at the Heart Foundation.

What is it? It's physical activity. And it's a sure-fire way to build your heart health, and improve your overall health and wellbeing at the same time.

However, with 56% of adults (9.5 million) in Australia either inactive or only doing low levels of physical activity, we are in the midst of an "inactivity crisis", says Prof Shilton.

"Yet, there is so much to gain from being physically active," he says. "Put simply, physical activity has a spectacular impact on health."

Heart disease and reducing your risk

A heart attack, the most common form of heart disease, occurs due to the narrowing or blocking of blood vessels in the heart muscle.

Heart disease is Australia's biggest killer. In 2017, it claimed the lives of 18,590 Australians

There is often a perception that heart disease is a 'man's disease'. However, women in Australia are almost three times more likely to die of heart disease than breast cancer.

Research shows that physical inactivity puts people at a higher risk of getting heart disease. However, physical activity strengthens the heart muscle, which improves its ability to pump blood to the lungs and throughout the body.

The broader benefits of physical activity

Prof Shilton says physical activity "is one of the best ways to ward off the risk factors associated with heart disease", such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, excess weight, diabetes or a family history of heart disease.

Being active for 30 minutes or more each day cuts a person's risk of heart disease by 35%.

"And, if the body is protected from heart disease, it will also be less susceptible to other health conditions," he says.

Prof Shilton says physical activity also "reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes by 30%, cuts the risk of breast and colon cancer by 20%, reduces blood pressure, improves mental health, reduces cognitive decline, and improves balance – thereby reducing the risk of falls."

"Heart health is at the heart of good health," he says.

Moving more and sitting less also helps to prevent unhealthy weight gain, builds strong muscles and bones, eases tension and stress, and creates opportunities for socialising and meeting new people.

What exactly is physical activity?

Physical activity is any activity that gets your body moving, makes your breathing become quicker and your heart beat faster. You can be physically active in many different ways, at any time of day.

But the three key principles are: move more, sit less, and do muscle-strengthening activities.

How to maintain an exercise/physical activity plan

Physical activity does not have to be organised or competitive to be beneficial, says Prof Shilton. Social activities with family and friends, or being active by yourself can be lots of fun and have many benefits. In addition, he says that the types of activities you enjoy may change throughout life, and that's OK. As long as it's enjoyable, you're more likely to do it – and that's what matters.

“Do what you enjoy,” says Prof Shilton. “Scheduling in an activity with a family member or friend will also make you more likely to do it.”

Setting a goal can also be helpful, Prof Shilton says.

“The wide availability of wearable devices and health apps means that we can more easily identify and monitor our activity,” he says. “It can be quite rewarding when the health app notifies you that you have reached 10,000 steps.”

Walking, swimming, and group exercise are the most common forms of physical activity undertaken by women. Other popular activities include walking the dog, dancing, swimming, riding a bike and going for a jog. Vigorous household chores, such as cleaning windows or raking leaves, count as physical activity too.

As far as strengthening activities, it does not have to be lifting weights in the gym. “Doing squats, push-ups, even digging in the garden, strengthens muscles and bones,” says Prof Shilton.

Reaching the recommended 30 minutes of physical activity per day can be achieved with simple tweaks to the daily routine; for example, walking to and from public transport or riding a bike to work or other destinations.

“Lack of time is the most common reason identified by women as what prevents them from being physically active, so using the commute can help to overcome time constraints during the week,” says Prof Shilton.

Naturally good for you

Our bodies are designed to move. Aside from the clear health benefits, being active makes you feel good, helps you to relax, and improves self-esteem and confidence.

Prof Shilton says that key findings from research on walking groups are that while people may initially join a walking group for a health reason, the reason they stay in the group is because they make friends. When it comes to loneliness, getting active or being active is a great solution.

“There is scarcely anything else that you could do every day to get the number of benefits that being active [brings],” says Prof Shilton.

“The cross-cutting benefits of physical activity make it nothing short of a wonder medicine.”

Read more information on [physical activity and better heart health](#).

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