

Get in Shape

It's never too late

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“Working out.” The very words can strike terror in the hearts and minds of the sedentary or self-proclaimed non-athlete. And it’s no wonder. Workout conjures images of something hard, something you *have* to do and may well not enjoy.

But what if you reframed the topic? What if you called it exercise and thought of it as a gift to yourself: doing something that you enjoy, look forward to *and* that is good for you?

If you do not exercise, you are not alone. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that about 35 percent of adults 65-75 years and 46 percent of adults over 75 are inactive or sedentary.

The benefits of fitness are myriad and clear cut. An active lifestyle counters the effects of aging, helps prevent and treat chronic disease and can prolong your life.

It’s never too late to start.

Adding more physical activity into your life doesn’t have to be difficult. “Start from a baseline,” said Dr. Douglas Cutter, a primary care sports medicine physician and the medical director of CJW Sports Medicine Center. Know where you are now and measure progress against your baseline.

“People don’t see immediate results and they give up,” Cutter said. “They don’t stay the course.” You can expect to see results in four to six weeks *if* you are consistent in your efforts, which means exercising at least three times each week.

For those who have been sedentary, have underlying health problems, or a concerning family history, see your physician before starting a fitness regime. He or she can prescribe the right exercise program based on your past medical history. If you will be walking or doing any exercise on your feet, be sure to be fitted with a proper pair of shoes from someone who is qualified to evaluate your needs.

If you’re looking for a kickstart to your exercise program, request a copy of the *AARP’s Physical Activities Workbook* to see how you can add physical activity into your life and set goals that work for you. It’s based on the *Be Active for Life Handbook*, which won a 2004 Silver Award from the National Health Information Awards program.

Another program that can help you get started is the President’s Challenge, a series of programs designed to help improve activity level at any age. The President’s Challenge

Active Lifestyle program is based on making the personal choice to live healthier and finding things you really like to do. It's geared for those who are just getting started and do less than 30 minutes of activity a day, five times per week.

Active Lifestyle helps you set realistic goals, provides a personal activity log and recognizes your accomplishments with rewards. The ultimate reward, however, is a stronger, healthier you.

Once you start, keep it up. "The key is consistency of effort. Don't give up. And listen to your body," said Cutter. "There are all different types of exercises," he added. "Don't be afraid to go outside your realm of comfort."

Sidebar:

Active Lifestyle Program: http://www.presidentschallenge.org/the_challenge/index.aspx.

AARP's *Physical Activities Workbook* Call 1-888-OUR-AARP (1-888-687-2277) to request a free copy

Possible pullout

The surgeon general has issued a report warning people – including older adults – that physical inactivity is a major threat to their health. (US Dept Health & HS, National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Aging)

Going the distance on two wheels

At 57, Tom Doyle has many impressive athletic accomplishments to his credit. But to Doyle, it's not about the awards. "It's about good health," he said. "I use my health as a springboard for other things."

There's no question about it. This man loves being active.

Doyle began running when he was 32. "I started walking a block at a time for rehabilitation for a broken leg. I was in a cast for six months and I wanted to be able to snow ski in a few months. At that time, marathon running was just taking off. I began walking and running. In 1980, I ran my first marathon."

At 40, Doyle realized it was important to cross train and began riding a bicycle. He was a natural and began to compete locally, regionally and then nationally. In 2004, Doyle won his overall age division (55-59) in the National Seniors Games for road racing competition. He also won his age division in the East Coast Nationals X-Terra games held in Richmond last year. This event consists of an off-road track bike race, trail running and swimming in the James River.

These accomplishments were just the most recent in a twelve-year winning streak. During that time he won 23 state championships, including last year's state time trials.

Winning is nice, Doyle acknowledged, but he does these activities simply because he enjoys them so much.

Despite his full schedule, Doyle makes time to help others. "One of my greatest satisfactions is volunteering for the Special Olympics. I train swimmers in the summer and advanced skiers during the winter." Most recently he made a mission trip in July to south Florida to help rebuild homes damaged in last year's hurricanes, an effort his great level of fitness surely helped.

Doyle still trains to ride competitively and plans to be doing outdoor activities for a long time. When he's not on a bike or running, he likes to swim, ski, white water raft and go canoeing. Oh, did we mention he has also completed 26 marathons?

"Training is a mental break," he said. "It's a chance to do something for myself."

Doyle hopes he can encourage people to get out and about and to find enjoyment in their activities. "Start out doing some kind of physical activity that you enjoy," he said, "walking, going to the gym. Do it three days each week for 20 minutes sustained each time. Enjoy your good health and take it from there. It will make you feel good about doing other things as well."

Choices, choices...and more choices

The lights in the aerobic studio at the YMCA are dimmed and soothing music plays quietly in the background. The class participants are sitting on their floor mats, legs crossed, eyes closed as the instructor leads them through deep breathing and visual relaxation before they begin the series of poses that are the core of this yoga class.

Next door, the music is louder, more upbeat, as the spinning class warms up and the riders start their hour-long stationary bicycling adventure.

Outside both rooms, people of all ages, shapes, sizes and fitness levels take advantage of the smorgasbord of cardio and strength training equipment. Downstairs, a water aerobics class shares the pool with lap swimmers. The energy here is palpable.

If you are the social type, you may enjoy the full gamut of exercise options at a fitness club. Don't worry if you don't know how to use the equipment or are worried about keeping up in class. A good health club will schedule an orientation and teach you how to exercise safely. Instructors urge class participants to go at their own pace. Some clubs also offer personal trainers who can help you create a personalized fitness plan and keep you motivated.

If, on the other hand, you prefer to workout alone, there is quite a lot you can do at home. There are many good exercise videos that you can do in front of your TV. If you're apprehensive about starting something new, this is a good way to learn the basics and become comfortable before venturing out to a class.

Another option is to purchase various pieces of exercise equipment to use in the privacy of your home. Manufacturers offer home versions of aerobic machines such as treadmills, stationary bikes and elliptical trainers. You can also purchase weight-training equipment that's as simple as a pair of dumbbells or as elaborate as a system of weights and pulleys.

Running, walking and bicycle riding are all easy to do in your neighborhood – alone or with friends and family. Don't forget your community swimming pool if you have one. Exercising in the water is great for people who have joint problems.

County parks and recreation departments and private organizations such as senior centers offer fitness classes as well. The choices generally include aerobic activities, gentle exercises such as yoga, and team sport programs (see separate article on team sports).

Running: just what the doctor ordered

Andrea Hess began smoking in college and by the time she was 41, she would typically smoke two to three packs of cigarettes a day. However, after several severe cases of pneumonia left her hospitalized and unable to care for her five-year old daughter, she realized something had to change.

Hess quit smoking and began walking on a treadmill for 30 minutes a day. After nine sessions, she joined her daughter in a one and a half mile race at school. "At that time, women didn't have racing shoes or jog bras," she chuckled.

Hess graduated from the treadmill to the outdoors. "I ran outside and it was wonderful," she exclaimed. "It was fun so I was hooked." A few months later, she discovered the joys of road racing.

Now 61, Hess is still every bit as committed to running. Her daughter is grown and in medical school, and her job as medical director of the coronary ICU at VCU Health System keeps her busy, but she always makes time for running.

In fact, Hess said a group of her co-workers want to start running and a few have taken the plunge. "They have a positive attitude towards it," she said.

Hess wears two hats: the avid runner and the physician. Dr. Hess says, "Running is one form of exercise that can improve your health. Besides the psychological boost, it lowers blood pressure, controls your weight, deters osteoporosis and helps your good lipids go up [which helps lower cholesterol]. It has tremendous health benefits."

"I like to run," said Hess the runner. "Psychologically I feel so much better. If I'm down in the dumps, I run." Running is one exercise you can do while still being able to talk and enjoy the company of others.

“Start slowly,” Hess advised. “Gradually build up. If you’re an older person, make sure your doctor says its okay. Take proper precautions. Watch for drivers and be courteous. And be *consistent*.”

Hess enjoys racing distances over 10 miles, including half marathons (13.1 miles) and marathons (26.2 miles). She’s completed six, including a best of 3:33 at the Columbus, Ohio marathon.

“Running is so important to my life. It keeps me so even keeled and it keeps me sane.”

Richmond marathon: 28 years and going strong

In 1978, Jimmy Carter was president, the cost of a first-class stamp was 13 cents, Sony introduced the Walkman and *The Deer Hunter* was among the year’s best movies. The USA Track and Field organization emerged that year and the early running boom was well underway.

1978 was also the first year of the (then-called) Richmond Newspapers Marathon. Over 1,100 runners registered to cover the Olympic distance of 26 miles and 285 yards (26.2 miles). The marathon event also included a half marathon (13.1 miles) and a five-mile race.

Over the years, the Richmond Marathon had a bit of a rollercoaster ride. In 1983, marathon participation began to steadily decline and by 1997, only 474 athletes had registered for that year’s event.

In 1998, the Sportsbackers took over the event and made significant changes. They discontinued the half marathon, made the 5-miler an 8K (a more recognized competitive distance), changed the course route and actively marketed the event to runners nationwide.

The most important change was, perhaps, not nearly as clear to the non-runner. The old Richmond Marathon was held in late October and began at noon. You know what mid-day in October can be: hot and humid. The new marathon is held the second week in November and starts at 8 a.m. while it’s still cool. It’s become a much more runner-friendly event and the Sportsbackers began promoting it as America’s Friendliest Marathon.

Participation has steadily increased since then, reaching a record of 4,221 registered marathon runners in 2004. The number of runners in the 8K has also continued to grow. In January 2005, *Runners World* magazine included the Richmond marathon in its ranking of “Best Little Marathons in 2005.”

Things have changed a lot since 1978, but the running phenomenon and interest in the marathon has not. Non-profits such as the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society offer Team-in-

Training marathon programs that double as fundraisers. This has made it easy for new runners to train with guidance and with others who are often also new to marathons.

Due to the demand and interest, the Sportsbackers now also offers marathon-training programs for all levels of runners.

If you are not up to training for a marathon, consider the less-daunting distance of 8K, which is slightly less than five miles. And if that doesn't appeal to you, then come out on Saturday, November 12, and cheer for the athletes. You'll get caught up in the excitement along the course and will come to appreciate the perseverance and commitment of the runners. It may not show on their faces, but the support of the fans along the way is a real boost to morale, especially late in the race when the going gets tough.

Sidebar:

Suntrust Richmond Marathon: www.richmondmarathon.com

That old team spirit

Every spring, 56-year old Dave Simon dusts off his bat and ball and checks out the playing fields at L.C. Bird High School, where the Chesterfield Senior Softball league plays weekly through the summer and into early fall. It's the start of a new season for a great American tradition and the anticipation is mounting.

Simon is a relative youngster on the men's team where some of his fellow players are in their 70s and still going strong. "Some of them are still pretty good," he marveled.

Simon loves softball so much he plays on several leagues. He's in good company. Adult and senior team sports leagues abound and many of his teammates also play on other adult leagues. Most senior leagues have both men's teams and coed teams. The minimum age is generally 50 for men and 40 for women.

Adult and senior leagues are not limited to softball. Chesterfield, Henrico and Hanover Counties offer leagues in various sports, including baseball, softball, basketball, volleyball, rugby, golf and soccer. Many churches also sponsor sports teams.

Simon said senior softball leagues do make some concessions for players whose bodies have been around the bases more than a few times. "There are two first bases," he explained. "One base is for the runner, the other for the fielder. This is to avoid collisions. First base is the spot for the most collisions."

He said they also have two home plates to again prevent collisions and discourage runners from sliding into home plate. Games are limited to 50 minutes or seven innings. The play is still competitive – after all, they are keeping score. But not to worry, the goal is to have fun and remain fit.

While most of the members of adult leagues have some background in their chosen sport, no experience is necessary. "It helps if you have athletic skills, although there's no requirement for skill level. Everyone is welcome," Simon said of Chesterfield Seniors Softball.

Women are in demand to balance out the coed teams. "If any women have any interest in sports at all and want to try, you are welcome to come out," encouraged Simon.

Chances are you have fond childhood memories of playing sports with your friends, the camaraderie and thrill of beating the other guy, even if it was just an impromptu pick-up game in the street. Now is your chance to make new memories. Join one of the many teams and resume playing an old favorite. Or, learn a brand new sport.

One step at a time

If there is such a thing as a perfect exercise, then walking fits the bill. It's free, other than a good pair of shoes. It's easy on the body. You can do it alone or with others. It's safe and convenient. You can walk on a treadmill in your home or at a health club, or outside through your neighborhood.

"Walking is very good," said Dr. Cutter. "There's not a lot of pounding on your joints. You can still vary the resistance by going up and down hills or carrying light weights."

According to the American Podiatric Medical Society, a brisk walk can burn up to 100 calories per mile, or 300 calories per hour, making it an effective way to control weight.

Regular walking is an effective heart-healthy exercise and has been shown to have measurable health effects. Results from the Nurses Health Study, a long-term study that examines issues relevant to older women, suggested that walking can protect healthy and diabetic women from cardiovascular disease. Researchers found that walking at a three-mile an hour pace for at least one hour a week lowered the risk of stroke among healthy women. Another study showed that walking at least three hours per week lowered the risk of heart attacks by up to 40 percent.

The most important piece of gear you need for a basic walking program is a good pair of shoes. Brett Richey, a pedorthist at Richey & Company Shoes, encourages you to wear shoes that are specifically designed for walking, not for work or dress.

"Choose a style with a shock absorbent sole and padding at the ball of the foot. Have both feet measured and fit the larger foot, remembering length *and* width," Richey said. "Did you know that 88 percent of American women wear shoes that are too small for them?"

In addition to being easy to do, it's easy to *start*, thanks to numerous local and online walking programs.

The Walking Site, an online resource, offers a beginner's walking program. Walkers can follow the 12-week program solo, or join the walking challenge that kicks off on October 12, just in time to get – and keep – you in shape over the holidays when time is short and food is plentiful.

The AARP has developed a free program designed to make walking fun. It's called Step Up to Better Health. Anyone can participate. The goal of the program is to increase the number of steps you take each day until you are walking 10,000 steps by the tenth week. Simply snap on a pedometer in the morning and log your daily steps online.

AARP adds a twist to make it interesting. The program tracks your steps along one of four famous virtual trails: Lewis and Clark, Alaska Highway, Highway 50, or the Appalachian Trail.

Most enclosed malls accommodate walkers and in fact, offer programs that include helping walkers keep track of their mileage. If you are looking to walk with others in a social atmosphere, mall walking is safe and keeps inclement weather from disrupting your routine.

If you like to walk outdoors, the Chesterfield County Parks and Recreation Department has organized Discover Chesterfield, a walking club for adults 55 and older. Staff members will lead walkers on trails through the county parks. Check the parks and recreation department in your county to find a walking program convenient to you.