Twelve common-sense steps you should take when starting an exercise program

A common-sense approach to exercise:

1. Be smart

When beginning any fitness program for the first time, check with your physician.

2. Maintain balance

A comprehensive fitness plan should incorporate aerobic activity, strength training, and flexibility, depending on your goals. If fitness is new to you, then begin with light to moderate aerobic activity, which means you should be able to maintain a conversation during exercise. Set small, realistic goals, such as strolling around campus for 20-30 minutes, or walking the dog when you get home. As stated, follow any restrictions or recommendations suggested by your physician.

3. Get creative

If the weather doesn't suit you, choose a building and walk/jog the stairs. You can work in intervals by jogging up and walking down, resting 30 seconds in between repetitions. Add variations by walking sideways,
backward or on the balls of your feet to work a variety of muscles. Who needs equipment? Playground fitness is just as fun! Park benches, picnic tables and jungle gyms can all be used as your own personal fitness equipment when getting to the gym isn't in the cards.

4. Put your best foot forward

Be picky when choosing your footwear. It should fit every aspect of your foot and provide the desired amount of support and cushioning. Do research on the web (Active.com is a good resource) before shopping to see which shoe best suits your feet. Address foot problems (for example, blisters, bone bruises, swelling, etc.) quickly to avoid serious issues. See your doctor if problems persist.

5. Your body knows best

Always listen to how your body is feeling; it speaks the truth. In the beginning, soreness following a fitness program is expected, but beware of continuous pain. Increase your activity duration slowly, as your body is building endurance. When the activity becomes less physically challenging, it is time to either increase your duration or intensity of the exercise.

6. Stay hydrated

Drink eight, 8-ounce glasses of water each day. When exercising, keep water accessible and take a sip about every 15 minutes during exercise. If exercising in extreme climates keep water more readily available and drink more frequently. Save one cup of water for post-workout rehydration to help flush toxins and alleviate future cramps.

7. Safety first

When it comes to fitness, proper form is key to avoiding injury. Appropriate body alignment can help reduce orthopedic trauma to your body and decrease the likelihood of being injured. Most machines have specific highlighted instructions posted on the frame, inclusive of which muscles are working throughout the range of motion. Allow these steps to guide you as you perform the exercise and you should be exercising in a safe manner. Personal trainers are also a great tool in overcoming the intimidation of an unfamiliar fitness facility. Your personal trainer can guide you through proper form and technique, ensuring that you get the most out of your routine.

8. Know the warning signs
Stop exercising if you experience any of these signs; abnormal heart rhythm, pain or pressure in your chest, dizziness, light-headedness, nausea during or after exercise, prolonged fatigue of insomnia. Check with your health care provider if symptoms persist.

9. Catch some zzzzzzs

Regular sleep patterns are helpful to regulate your body's metabolic rate. Lack of sleep can disrupt your body's internal clock, wreaking havoc on your system. To maximize your sleep quality, avoid caffeine within a few hours of bedtime and allow yourself plenty of time to wind down before turning in for the night. Regular physical activity will also help regulate your body's sleep capability.

10. Make a master plan

The best recipe for success is leaving a little room for last-minute decisions or detours. Begin your week by creating an exercise plan with goals for each day. Do the same for nutrition and sleep. At the end of each day, mark off the activities that you completed and the goal you reached. Seeing your accomplishments on paper not only hold you accountable for your actions, but does wonders for your motivation.

11. Keep your body guessing

While treadmill walking is a great way to begin your program, it is ideal to alternate with a lower-impact activity, such as elliptical, arc trainer or rower. Mixing up your routine will not only maximize your results, but it will also work different muscle groups and relieve your joints from ongoing impact of the treadmill or walking outdoors. Group fitness classes are also an excellent way to make your fitness routine fun and ever-changing. The added group support and guidance from the instructor are added bonuses.

12. Have fun!

Remember that exercise was designed to keep our bodies active and that doesn't mean working out in a fitness center or on a machine. Stay active doing things you loved to do as a child, like roller skating, playing tennis or dancing. You will be more likely to adhere to a regular fitness regimen if you include activities that you enjoy.

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