

## Aerobic Exercise

The word aerobic means, “occurring in the presence of oxygen.” Aerobic exercise, therefore, pertains to activities that occur as you breathe the air while you exercise at a steady rate. This is different from when you exercise in short bursts, such as when you sprint up a hill and quickly become out of breath. Examples of aerobic exercises include long distance walking, “paced” running, stair climbing, biking, swimming, aerobic dance, or any other activity that raises your breathing rate and keeps it up for a while. When you can keep your breathing rate elevated in this steady manner, you are also strengthening your heart and are said to be improving your cardiovascular endurance.

Before undertaking an exercise program, you should check with your medical professional—especially if you have chest pains, heart trouble, high blood pressure, arthritis, diabetes, or if you often feel faint or dizzy. This is even more important for men over the age of 40 who have been inactive and who have two or more risk factors for heart disease. These risk factors include high cholesterol, high blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, or a family history of heart disease before the age of 45.

Here are some tips to get you started.

Before actually beginning to exercise, you should start with at least a five minute warm-up. Gradually begin to move and slowly stretch your body so that you “get the blood moving.” Once you have warmed-up, begin the activity. It’s important to remember that you don’t have to do the same kind of exercise every time. You might want to swim one day, walk another day, and bicycle a third day. Working out on a stationary cycle, a stair-climbing device, a rowing machine, or a cross-country skiing machine are other good alternatives. You should do what you enjoy so you’re motivated to continue.

Too much of a good thing can be problematic, however. Most people probably shouldn’t exercise aerobically for more than an hour at a time because this excessive amount typically invites more injury than it does fitness. Twenty minutes seems to be the right amount. Also, you should perform these exercises at least three times a week at your “target heart rate.” The target heart rate is the ideal “paced” range for your pulse during aerobic exercise, and it varies depending on your age and level of fitness. One easy way to know if you’re exercising at the right intensity is to use the talk/sing test. If your pace is meeting your target heart rate, you should be able to talk without being breathless. If you can’t catch your breath to talk at all, your exercise intensity is too great. On the other hand, if you can sing while you exercise, it’s probably not vigorous enough. Just remember that, while exercising, listen to your body. Don’t increase the duration or intensity of your exercise if you are experiencing shortness of breath, persistent fatigue, muscle soreness, joint pain, or any sign of injury. If you feel chest pains, an unusual or irregular heart beat, severe shortness of breath, dizziness, or if you feel like you might faint, stop immediately and call your medical professional. If your symptoms fit those associated with heart attack or stroke, call 911 or seek immediate emergency care.

And, finally, when you are finished with your exercise, you should end with a five minute cool-down. Again, gradually move and slowly stretch your body.

While aerobic exercise is vitally important, it is only one of three components that make up a complete fitness program. To have a complete fitness program, you’ll also want to include “strength training,” such as weight lifting or calisthenics, to improve muscular strength, and more “stretching exercises,” to

improve flexibility. To feel better and to prevent disease and injury, you need all three in your exercise regimen.

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