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## Fitness for life

In an effort to stay healthy and live longer, many Americans take numerous daily prescription medications to treat their health problems. However, the most important prescription of all is missing from most of our lives. As far as preventing diseases, and lengthening and strengthening lives, there is no single drug available as versatile and effective as regular exercise. Yet only 15% of Americans perform the recommended amount of weekly physical activity.

*Why do most of us forego exercise?* — The usual list includes lack of time, lack of incentive, and dislike of the activity itself. Committing to a regular exercise program takes persistence and motivation. But there is much to be motivated for.

Some benefits from exercise include:

- **Weight management.** Exercise burns calories and over time will raise a person's resting metabolic rate. When combined with a sensible diet plan, physical activity will promote weight loss and maintenance.
- **Improvement of blood pressure and cholesterol.** Regular exercise has been shown to reduce hypertension and harmful triglyceride levels, while raising good cholesterol (HDL) levels.
- **Mental health.** Studies have shown that exercise is associated with lowering stress and mitigating depression.
- **Bone health.** Weight bearing exercise helps to maintain bone mass and prevent osteoporosis as a person ages.
- **Blood sugar control.** Exercise will help prevent the onset of type 2 diabetes and improve blood sugar control in existing diabetes.
- **Mortality reduction.** Overall, physically active people live longer than those who live a sedentary lifestyle.
- **Reduced healthcare costs.** Because of the reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and osteopenic fractures, physically active people have lower annual healthcare bills.

Most of us are aware of these many benefits of exercise, and yet still find it difficult to fit a daily fitness routine into our lives.

Five tips for increasing success:

- **Set reasonable goals.** No one can run a marathon straight off the couch. Start with a daily, 15-minute, brisk walk and build on your success. Your ultimate goal should be at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise five days a week.
- **Choose an easily accessible activity.** Walking requires no equipment other than a comfortable pair of shoes and can be done anywhere from the mall to mountain trails.
- **Incorporate exercise into your daily life.** Park far away from the store entrance, take the stairs instead of the elevator, and take a walk on your lunch break.
- **Vary your activities.** There is no better way to doom an exercise program than to pick an activity you dislike and to never vary your routine.
- **Find a friend to exercise with.** Companionship is a valuable tool to maintaining a regular exercise program.

*Commit to starting today* — If you are ready to start an exercise program, or to increase your current one, see your healthcare provider for advice. They can help identify activities that are appropriate for you and work with you to set goals. Partnering with a healthcare professional to organize a fitness program can be a valuable tool to maintaining the program itself.

Remember to discontinue exercising if you ever have chest pain or pressure, dizziness, lightheadedness, nausea, vomiting, or palpitations. Seek medical attention immediately if these occur.

*Celebrate your successes as you achieve them* — Every time you engage in aerobic exercise you will improve your health and decrease the risk of chronic disease. Think of fitness as a lifetime prescription for well-being. Our area offers an incredible variety of exercise options. Your motivation and persistence in maintaining an exercise program will be rewarded in innumerable ways.

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*A Leavenworth resident since 1988, Ms. Criminale joined the Family Practice Clinic as a Physician Assistant in 2009. Previously, she worked as an EMT for Cascade Ambulance for 15 years and has been as a professional ski-patroller at Stevens Pass, a whitewater river guide in the Grand Canyon, and a Wilderness Medicine course instructor. Questions or comments? Please call 548-3420 or visit [www.cascademedical.org](http://www.cascademedical.org)*