

Raising Healthy Children: Active Families¹

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Everyone remembers playing games such as hopscotch, freeze tag, and kickball at recess in elementary school. It felt great to go outside, get your blood flowing, and work your muscles. Being active does not have to be a thing of the past—and what better way to start than with the activities you love the most! It's time to grab your family and start moving!

This publication highlights the health benefits and recommendations for physical activity. It also includes tips for being active and suggestions of fun activities that the whole family can do together. If you have any existing health conditions, be sure to consult your physician before beginning a physical activity program.



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Physical Activity

Physical activity is any muscle movement that requires energy beyond your resting level (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011a). In other words, physical activity increases your heart rate.

Physical activities can be categorized by their intensity level, or how hard the body has to work. Activities that require a moderate to vigorous level of intensity are the types of activities that get your heart pumping. The “talk test” is an easy way to measure the intensity of an activity. During a moderate-intensity physical activity, it is easy to talk but almost impossible to sing. Vigorous physical activities are more intense than moderate-intensity physical activities and use more energy. During vigorous-intensity activities, it is difficult to say more than a few words without taking

Table 1. Moderate and Vigorous Physical Activities

Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walking briskly (not race-walking) • Water aerobics • Bicycling (slower than 10 mph) • Tennis (doubles) • Ballroom dancing • General gardening
Vigorous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Race-walking • Jogging • Running • Swimming laps • Tennis (singles) • Aerobic dancing • Bicycling (faster than 10 mph) • Jumping rope • Heavy gardening • Hiking uphill or with a heavy backpack

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a breath (CDC, 2011b). Fortunately, moderate-intensity physical activities are generally safe for most people (CDC, 2011c). Examples of moderate and vigorous physical activities are listed in Table 1. (CDC, 2011b).

Health Benefits

Being physically active has many health benefits. Physical activity is good for mental and physical health.

Mental Health

Participating in regular physical activity (3–5 times per week for 30–60 minutes) provides many mental health benefits. Physical activity can reduce the risk of depression and can help people sleep better. It can also keep your learning, thinking, and judgment skills sharp as you age (CDC, 2011c).

Physical Health

Physical activity can reduce the risk for many conditions and improve overall health. It can help with the following (CDC, 2011c):

- Control weight
- Reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease
- Reduce the risk for type 2 diabetes and metabolic syndrome
- Reduce the risk for certain cancers (colon cancer, breast cancer in women)

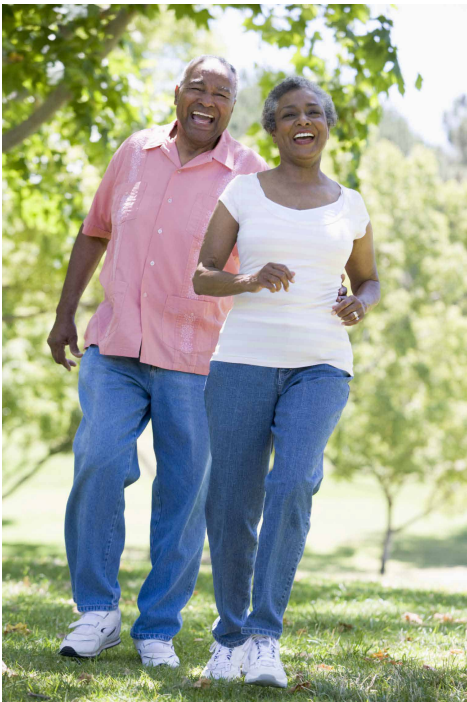


Figure: 2 Credits: iStockphoto

- Strengthen bones and muscles
- Improve the ability to do daily activities
- Prevent falls (for older adults)
- Increase the chances of living longer

Bone Health

Although all the health benefits of physical activity are noteworthy, bone and muscle health are especially important. Healthy bones, joints, and muscles support the body and ensure that a person can perform daily activities and be physically active. Research has shown that moderate-intensity physical activities that strengthen the bones and muscles can slow the loss of bone density that comes with age (CDC, 2011c). Weight-bearing activities are especially important for children and teens, because the best time to build healthy bones is during years of rapid growth (American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, 2007).

To build and maintain healthy bones, it is important to participate in weight-bearing exercises. Doing so can reduce the risk for developing a disease called osteoporosis, a condition in which the bones become brittle and are more likely to break. Examples of weight-bearing activities include the following (American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, 2007):

- Brisk walking, jogging, and hiking
- Yard work (pushing a lawn mower, heavy gardening)
- Soccer
- Basketball
- Dancing
- Stair climbing
- Tennis
- Skiing, skating
- Bowling
- Weight training with free weights or machines

Recommendations

To gain the most health benefits from physical activity, you should do the right amount and types of activities for your age. The recommended guidelines for children, adults, and older adults are listed below.

Children

In general, children are more active than adults, so they may already meet their physical activity needs. Children and adolescents should do 60 minutes of physical activity

every day (CDC, 2011d). It is especially important for children to participate in aerobic activities, as well as muscle- and bone-strengthening activities.



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1. AEROBIC ACTIVITY

Aerobic activities also can be called “cardio.” They quicken breathing and get the heart beating faster (CDC, 2011e). Aerobic activities should make up most of a child’s 60 (or more) minutes of daily physical activity. These can include moderate-intensity or vigorous-intensity activities, but be sure to include vigorous-intensity aerobic activities at least 3 days per week (CDC, 2011d).

2. MUSCLE STRENGTHENING

Children can strengthen their muscles doing a wide variety of age-appropriate activities. Gymnastics, playing on a jungle gym, push-ups, and even climbing trees are muscle-strengthening activities. Include them at least 3 days per week (CDC, 2011d).

3. BONE STRENGTHENING

As previously mentioned, building and maintaining strong bones at this stage is critical for health later in life. Running and jumping rope are examples of bone-strengthening activities that most children already enjoy. Include them at least 3 days per week (CDC, 2011d).

Adults

Adults should focus on two types of physical activity: aerobic activities and muscle-strengthening activities. Adults can meet their physical activity needs in a variety of ways (CDC, 2011e):

1. Adults can participate in 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) of **moderate-intensity aerobic activity** every week **and** muscle-strengthening activities 2 or more days of the week. These activities should work all the major muscle groups including legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms.
2. Adults can participate in 75 minutes (1 hour and 15 minutes) of **vigorous-intensity aerobic activity** every week **and** muscle-strengthening activities 2 or more days of the week. These activities should work all the major muscle groups including legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms.
3. Adults can participate in a mix of moderate- and vigorous-intensity aerobic activity **and** muscle-strengthening activities 2 or more days of the week. These activities should work all the major muscle groups including legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms.
4. Adults do not have to participate in their weekly physical activity all at once. It is still possible to gain the health benefits of physical activity even if it is done as little as 10 minutes at a time. As long as the activities are of moderate- or vigorous-intensity, 10 minutes at a time is fine. For example, a 10-minute brisk walk 3 times a day, 5 days a week gives a total of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity.

Older Adults

Physical activity is one of the most important things an older adult can do to maintain his/her health. It can prevent a number of health problems, which in turn will allow an older adult to remain independent in doing daily activities. Adults who are 65 years or older, are generally fit, and have no serious health conditions can follow the same exact physical activity recommendations for adults listed above (CDC, 2011f).

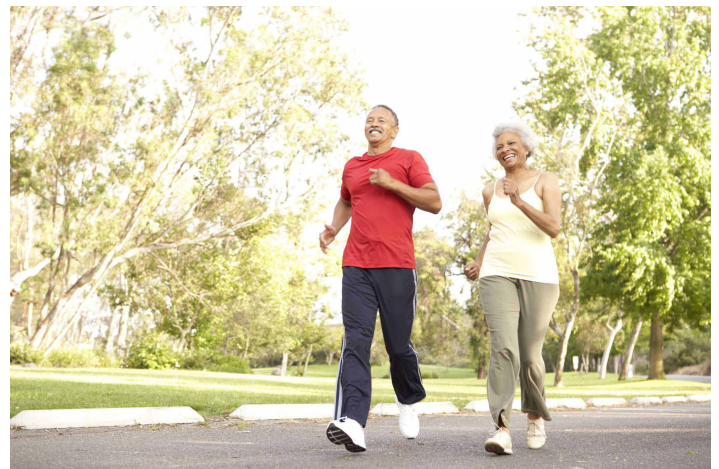


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Children and Families

Participating in family physical activities can have many benefits, including better communication between parents and children, more time spent together, enjoying each other's company, improved physical health and fitness, increased mental health, and weight management. Plus, helping children learn to enjoy being physically active can help them stay active in the future.

It's important to be a good role model and to encourage physical activity during childhood because inactive children are much more likely to be inactive adults. Studies have shown that children who feel support from friends and families to be active or are surrounded by others interested in physical activity are more likely to be active (Let's Move, n.d.).

Get Started!

Physical activity does not have to be expensive or boring. Many activities are free or inexpensive. For example, jumping rope, hiking, and playing tag are free activities the family can do together. Physical activity should also be fun. Switch up the routine and try something new. Explore a new bike route or try a new sport. The possibilities are endless!

Some suggestions for family activities are listed below. Many more are out there, so don't be afraid to get creative!

- Plant a garden
- Walk, jog, run
- Hike
- Swim
- Do yoga or pilates
- Walk the dog
- Jump rope
- Play tag
- Dance or do Zumba
- Bowl
- Ice-skate, roller-skate, rollerblade
- Play racquetball
- Row: kayak, canoe, paddleboat
- Play freeze tag
- Stretch
- Play catch

- Play hide-and-peek
- Bike ride
- Play a sport (baseball, basketball, football, softball, soccer, tennis)

For More Information

For more information about being active as a family, contact one of the following reliable sources in your county:

- UF/IFAS Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Educator (look in the blue pages of your telephone book). UF/IFAS Extension offices are listed at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>.
- WIC nutritionist at your county Health Department (also in the blue pages of your telephone book).
- For referral to a registered dietitian (RD) in your area you can call the Florida Dietetic Association at (850) 386-8850 or check the yellow pages of your phone book.

Recommended Websites

- **MyPlate** – <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** – <http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/>
- **Healthy People 2020** – <http://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/default.aspx>
- **Physical Activity for Children** – <http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/standards/nationalGuidelines/PA-Children-5-12.cfm>

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