

Getting started - increasing your level of physical activity

Adapted from material kindly supplied from the web site of the American Diabetes Association - www.diabetes.org

The journey of a thousand miles starts from where you stand. Getting more active is exactly like that. It all comes down to single steps you take each day. It can be as simple and as difficult as starting any journey.

Taking that first step can be hard. Maybe you've never been active. Maybe you used to be but over the years you've stopped. Maybe you've just been diagnosed with diabetes and are feeling unwell or overwhelmed. We all have plenty of reasons not to start increasing our level of physical activity. We may think we are:

- Too old
- Too overweight
- Too weak
- Too sick
- Too busy
- Too tired
- Too discouraged

But, remember it's never too late. With few exceptions, even if you're disabled or injured, you can still improve your level of fitness. Once you get going, you'll be amazed how quickly your excuses fade.



Too old?

Look around for classes or groups with others in your age group. There are older people's walking groups, water exercise classes, stretch programs, Tai Chi, chair aerobics classes. Check your local YMCA, YWCA, or information office.

The Green prescription operates throughout the country and your GP can write you a prescription for exercise into this scheme. Phone 0800 ACTIVE (0800 228 483). Nothing in your area? Start your own program with a partner, such as a relative or friend.

Too overweight?

If you feel too awkward or embarrassed to exercise, join the club. Most people feel slightly embarrassed when they start out. But the reality is that people will admire you when they see your commitment to improving your health.

If you're trying to lose weight, even a small amount of regular physical activity can help. Remember that sometimes when you are exercising your weight may not come down. But you have exchanged fat for muscle (changed your body composition). This is a big achievement (both for health and looks) even though your weight may not have changed.



Too weak?

Regular physical activity will quite quickly help you have more strength and energy for daily life.

Too sick?

Of course, you can't exercise when you're ill or when your blood glucose levels are very high. But once you are feeling better, regular physical activity will help you stay well. Start small and stick with it.



Too busy?

You don't have to spend hours exercising to see the benefits. Some of the greatest health benefits come with the introduction of regular amounts of moderate exercise (for example, 30 minutes of brisk walking daily).

You can often achieve this making a small change to your daily routine. For example, walking to work or the shops rather than taking the car. Using an exercycle while you watch the morning or evening news. If your activity times are part of your daily routine they are often much easier to stick with.

Too tired?

Regular physical activity will actually give you more energy. Toning your muscles and conditioning your heart, lungs, and blood vessels will give you more energy to handle the work and stress of daily life.

Too discouraged?

Everyone has times when they feel low. This is especially so if you have a chronic health issue or have just been given a diagnosis of a health problem. However, exercise has been demonstrated to improve your mood. In fact exercise is now being prescribed by many psychiatrists as a treatment for depression. If you can get over the first barrier of making a start you will often find that regular exercise will make you feel more optimistic and happier.



The First Step

For some of you the first step to fitness may be a visit to the doctor. If you have any of the complications of diabetes, or a history of heart disease, or you have had diabetes for more than 5 years, get a thorough medical check before starting your activity routine.

This should check your:

- Blood pressure
- Blood lipid levels (cholesterol)
- HBA1c (a blood test that measures your average blood glucose levels)
- Health of your heart and circulatory system
- Eyes
- Feet

You and your doctor or diabetes nurse educator can discuss choices about what kind of activity will be safest and best for you. Some complications of diabetes make certain types of physical activity bad choices. If possible, get an exercise prescription (green prescription). Your GP or diabetes nurse educator can write this script. Ask your doctor for an exercise plan that takes into account your current level of activity, special health concerns, and your diabetes management plan.

Set Goals

Goals help give shape to your plan. They give you something specific to work toward. Reaching a goal marks your success and makes you feel good. Setting new goals keeps you going. Start out by asking yourself why you plan to exercise. Do you want to:

- Feel better?
- Move easier?
- Lose weight or change your body composition?
- Get stronger?
- Have more energy?
- Reduce stress?
- Stay fit while learning to live with diabetes?
- Reduce your risk of diabetes complications such as heart disease?
- Get your doctor or partner to stop nagging you?
- Improve your blood pressure and blood glucose levels?

Once you know what your overall goals are then set short-term goals that are realistic and easy to achieve. It is often better to commit to an extra ten minutes of physical activity per day and achieve it than set a goal that you cannot currently achieve.

When setting your short-term goals remember to start small and gradually increase. For example, walk ten minutes per day and increase by five minutes every 4th to 7th day until you have reached your target time (e.g., 20-30 minutes daily).

Keep a regular daily record of your achievements. Some people use a diary or calendar for this. It can be very encouraging when you look back over your achievements especially if you have hit a bad patch.

A daily record can also help you to assess how things are going and when or if you need to make changes. Noting down any barriers you have to exercise may help you to build strategies to overcome them. (e.g., if always 'too tired' for evening exercise try exercising in the morning instead).

Try to treat exercise as a 'not negotiable' bit of your day, like work, meals or picking up your children. Schedule it into a piece of the day where it is least likely to come under threat from other activities.

If necessary your doctor and diabetes educator can help you plan:

- The best times to exercise - this is especially important if you take insulin or medication to lower your blood glucose levels
- When to test your blood glucose levels and what your test results mean in terms of exercise.
- How to avoid problems with low blood glucose levels
- How to inspect your feet before and after exercise. For more information, visit the ["Diabetes and your feet"](#) section of this web site
- Safety issues

For more information visit the ["Exercise \(type1\)"](#) or ["Exercise \(type2\)"](#) sections of this web site.

Setbacks

In every part of our lives we have times when it is harder for us to stick to our goals. When this happens try not to beat yourself up. Look over your exercise record when you were doing well and give yourself a pat on the back. You know you can do it. You have written proof! Give yourself credit for every achievement no matter how small. Even if the achievement is only thinking about starting exercise. Planning is an essential first step.

You may need to set smaller goals for a short period in order to get back into your routine. Analyse what caused the setback. Do you need to change your plan? Set a significant reward for when you have achieved your goals again for a two-week period. Celebrate your successes.

Other Benefits of Increased Physical Activity

Staying physically active not only improves your physical health. It can result in you:

- Looking better
- Meeting new friends
- Escaping from the daily grind
- Learning new skills
- Reducing stress

A Sample Plan

This is a sample plan to get started if you are not already physically active:

- Five minutes gentle walking (warm up), three minutes vigorous walking, three minutes gentle walking (warm down)
- Do this four times a week
- Increase the vigorous walking section by two to five minutes weekly until you are walking vigorously for 30 minutes four times a week
- Once you are comfortable with this level of exercise increase the frequency to exercising for 30 minutes on most days of the week
- You may add in gentle stretching after warm up and after cool down if you wish

[Return to the top of this page . . .](#)