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How exercise builds a stronger heart

he benefits of physical activity are well-documented. Adults may be reminded of the short- and long-term benefits of exercise when visiting their physicians for annual well visits or to treat an illness. Though exercise is often viewed as a means to losing weight, it's equally important for people of all ages to recognize the many other ways physical activity benefits the body, including its role in heart health.

The World Health Organization reports that cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) are the leading causes of death across the globe. A host of variables can lead to a CVD diagnosis, and a sedentary lifestyle is among them. By including exercise in their daily routines, individuals can build a stronger heart that benefits their bodies in myriad ways.

Exercise, the heart and lung function

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute notes that regular moderate- and vigorous-intensity physical activity strengthens the heart muscle. A stronger heart is more capable of pumping blood to the lungs, which the NHLBI notes ensures a stronger blood flow to the muscles.

Exercise and blood oxygen levels

Exercise helps to increase oxygen levels in the blood by improving the ability of the heart to pump blood not only to the lungs, but throughout the body. That's a notable benefit, as the Cleveland Clinic notes hypoxia, a condition marked by low blood oxygen levels, can lead to adverse health conditions, such as damage to individual organ systems, including the brain.

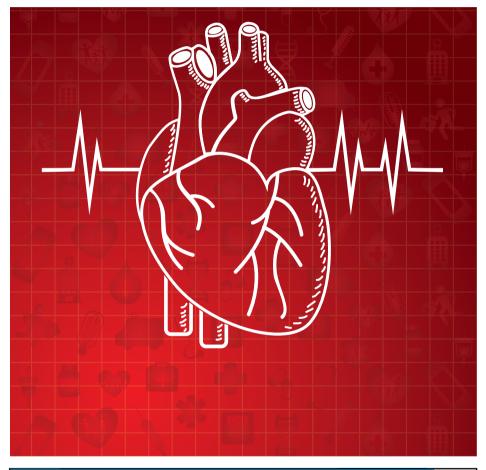
Exercise and coronary heart disease

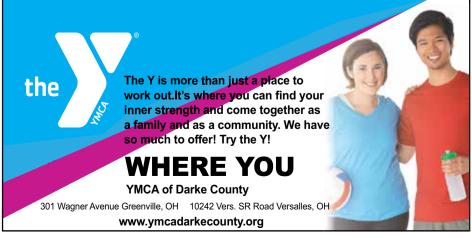
Coronary heart disease is a condition marked by the buildup of plaque in the coronary arteries, which the NHLBI notes supply the heart muscle with oxygen-rich blood. Moderate- and vigorous-intensity aerobic activity has been linked to a lower risk for coronary heart disease because it can help people lower their blood pressure; reduce a type of fat in the blood known as triglycerides; increase "good" cholesterol levels; help the body manage its blood sugar and insulin levels; and reduce levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), which is a sign of inflammation associated with a higher risk of heart disease.

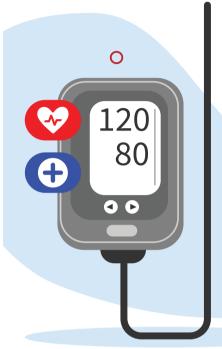
These are just a handful of the ways that exercise can help individuals build a stronger heart. Individuals who have already been diagnosed with heart disease and have lived a largely sedentary lifestyle are urged to speak with their physicians about safe ways to incorporate exercise into their daily routines. Vigorous aerobic activity may not be safe for people who

have heart disease, so anyone in that situation should not simply begin exercising on their own.

A healthy heart is a building block of a long life. More information about exercise and heart health can be found at nhlbi.nih.gov.









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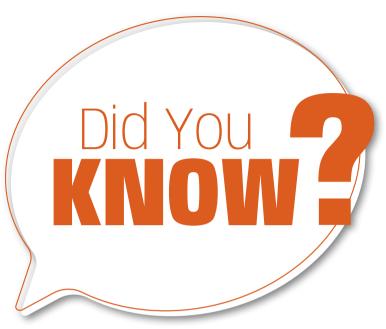


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Encouraging children to be physically active can be an important step in helping them to be healthier later in life.

The Physical Rehabilitation Network (PRN) says active kids are more likely to become healthy adults. Studies have shown that being physically active and making smart food choices while young can lead to a reduced risk of developing many serious health conditions later in life, which can include diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, heart disease, and even certain cancers. What's more, Better Health Victoria in Australia says evidence suggests that physically active children also are more likely to mature into physically active adults. Developing fitness skills early in life is a wise choice. However, one in six kids between the ages of 2 and 19 in the United States are obese, and just one in three are physically active each day, reports the PRN. Families can work together to help kids get on paths to better health and to become more active. This may involve putting limits on screen time and encouraging outdoor play and group active activities like sports or dance.



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Activities that can improve cardiovascular endurance

edical professionals and researchers tout the benefits of cardiovascular exercise, often referred to as "cardio," which various organizations note should be incorporated into any well-rounded fitness regimen. The Mayo Clinic notes the many benefits of cardio, which include increased stamina, a stronger immune system, a lower risk for chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease, and improved mood.

Cardiovascular workouts may not seem as intimidating as strength-training exercises that require heavy lifting, but they can still prove challenging. That's particularly so for individuals who may feel as though their endurance levels could use some work. The Cleveland Clinic notes that cardiovascular endurance refers to how well the heart and lungs can supply the oxygen a body needs to exercise at mediumto high-intensity. That oxygen is an energy source the body utilizes to fuel cells in the tissues and muscles, which illustrates how vital cardiovascular endurance can be in relation to performance. With that in mind, individuals can consider these activities as they seek to improve their cardiovascular endurance.

- Sprint interval training (SIT): A 2107 study published in the journal Sports Medicine noted that research in the preceding decade found that sprint interval training (SIT) provided health benefits similar to or greater than those credited to moderate-intensity continuous training (MICT). SIT is an umbrella term that can be used to describe various exercises, each of which involves sprinting for short bursts followed by several minutes of recovery
- High-intensity interval training (HIIT): The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health notes that HIIT incorporates numerous rounds of exercises that alternate between several minutes of high-intensity movements and shorter periods of low-intensity movements.

The goal of the high-intensity portions is to increase the heart rate to at least 80 percent of its maximum rate. • Additional exercises: SIT and HIIT are not the only exercises that can help individuals improve their cardiovascular endurance. The Cleveland Clinic notes that swimming, cycling. dancing, jogging, walking, jumping rope, and climbing stairs are some additional activities that can strengthen the ability of the heart and lungs to supply oxygen to the body. People of all ages can work to improve their cardiovascular endurance, though the Cleveland Clinic recommends individuals first consult their health care provider to devise a strategy that will be both safe and effective. More information about cardiovascular endurance can be found at clevelandclinic.org.





Important Tips for Women's Mental Health

Some mental disorders are more common in women than men, including depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders.

There are also disorders unique to women. For example, some women experience symptoms of depression at times of hormone change, such as:

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- During or after pregnancy
- Around the time of their period
- During the menopause transition

Mental disorders can be treated: A primary care provider is a good place to start if you're looking for help. They can refer you to a qualified mental health professional, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, or clinical social worker, who can help you figure out next steps.

SOURCE: www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/women-and-mental-health



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Activities that can promote cardiovascular health

esolving to be physically active is an important step towards heart health and overall well-being. Exercise is one of the most effective tools for strengthening the heart and avoiding various illnesses, including high cholesterol, that can affect cardiovascular health, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Although any exercise can be beneficial, there is a fitness recipe designed to be the most effective for strengthening the heart and helping it to work to its full potential. Here are the guidelines recommended by the American Heart Association and Johns Hopkins Medicine.

- Get 150 minutes per week or more of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes per week of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity, or a combination of both. These activities can include running, cycling, swimming, and others that will get the heart pumping.
- Incorporate moderate- to high-intensity muscle-strengthening activity at least two days a week.
- Strength training should be designed to work the entire body. It doesn't have to be traditional weightlifting, either. Body weight exercises, yoga, Pilates, and even tai chi can

build strength and offer additional benefits like improving balance.

- Consider HIIT exercises. HIIT stands for highintensity interval training, which involves exercising as hard as one can for a short period, and then resting briefly before exercising hard again for a short period. While there are many different HIIT programs, UT Southwestern Medical Center says a popular one involves exercising hard for four minutes, followed by three minutes of recovery time, for four cycles total.
- While stretching, flexibility and balance exercises do not directly affect heart health, they do help one stay flexible and free from joint pain and other issues that can sideline a person from exercise. Doing what one can to protect against falls and reduce risk of being sedentary will benefit the heart in the long run.
- Don't discount everyday activities in relation to how they can enhance heart health.
 Walking, gardening, playing with children, or tossing a ball to a family pet are beneficial aerobic activities.

Heart health is something to take seriously, and exercise plays a key role in strengthening the heart







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Exercise can be good for the brain

t is well documented that physical activity can be beneficial for the body, but what about the effects of exercise on the brain? Exercise enthusiasts will be glad to learn there are some notable ways that physical activity can benefit the brain.

A 2018 study published in **Frontiers in Psychology** indicated that much evidence shows that physical exercise is a strong gene modulator that causes structural and functional changes in the brain that can benefit cognitive functioning and well-being.

Exercise also seems to be a protective factor against neurodegeneration.

Dr. Scott McGinnis, an instructor in neurology at Harvard Medical School, says there is a lot of science behind exercise boosting memory and thinking skills. Exercise can encourage production of growth factors, which are chemicals that affect the growth of new blood vessels in the brain and even the number of brain cells and their ability to thrive. Various studies point to exercise causing growth in the parts of the brain that control thinking and memory. The World Health Organization even notes that about two hours of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week can help improve thinking and memory skills.

Another study, led by a team of sports scientists at the University of Geneva, grouped 350,000 people in the United Kingdom according to genetic variants associated with more or less physical activity. Those who had a genetic proclivity toward being active tended to perform better on a set of cognitive tests. Additional studies have found that more physical activity correlated to better cognitive performance at age 69 among individuals who had been tracked for 30 years.

Although many health professionals agree that exercise is good for the brain, the amount of exercise and where it takes place also may play a role in cognitive health. A 2023 study published in **Scientific Reports** found that time spent in natural outdoor environments led to increases in cognition similar to those resulting from acute exercises. Researchers found that when exercise and nature are combined, the impact on cognition is magnified.

Researchers have not pinpointed whether one exercise is better than another for improving brain health. Walking is one way to start, as it is accessible for people of all ages and requires little to no equipment. Anyone beginning an exercise regimen should discuss plans with a doctor and speak about their exercise goals.







How routine physical activity affects mental health

he physical changes people experience after committing to routine physical activity are visible to the naked eye. After making such a commitment, particularly if one is accustomed to a sedentary lifestyle, people may shed a noticeable amount of weight, move more quickly and even appear younger, a change that is perhaps related to the positive effects exercise has on sleep.

Less noticeable but no less advantageous are the mental health benefits associated with routine exercise. According to the Mental Health Foundation, physical activity releases chemicals in the brain that positively affect mood, thus making exercise a tool anyone can utilize to improve their mental health. As individuals ponder the benefits of physical activity, they can keep the following ways exercise affects mental health in mind.

• Exercise and stress reduction: A 2022 Gallup poll found that 40 percent of adults worldwide experienced a lot of stress. The poll asked adults in 142 countries and areas, which underscores the significance of stress as a legitimate global health concern. The MHF notes that the most common physical signs of stress include difficulty sleeping, sweating and loss of appetite, symptoms that are triggered by a flood of the stress hormones adrenaline and noradrenaline released in the body. Those hormones increase blood pressure and heart rate. Exercise can help to alleviate stress, and the MHF notes that adults who are highly active have been found to have lower rates of stress than those who live more sedentary lifestyles.

- Exercise and self-esteem: A 2022 study published in The Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness compared 352 participants between the ages of 20 and 40 who regularly exercised at least two days per week for the previous six months with 350 similarly aged sedentary individuals. The study assessed various characteristics of each group and researchers ultimately concluded that those who exercised had higher levels of self-esteem than those who did not. As a result, the authors behind the study recommended exercise as a preferred method to increase self-esteem.
- Exercise and depression: A systematic re-

view and network meta-analysis of randomized control trials found that exercise is an effective treatment for depression. That review and analysis, published in the peer-reviewed medical journal **The BMJ** in 2024, reviewed 218 unique studies involving more than 14,000 participants. Walking, jogging, yoga, and strength training were found to be especially effective

at treating depression, which the World Health Organization estimates affects about 280 million people worldwide.

The physical benefits of routine physical activity may be most noticeable. However, regular exercise also has a profound effect on individuals' mental health.





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t's not uncommon for individuals engaged in strength training workout regimens to wonder how much time they should rest between sets, a situation that can only grow more difficult when going online, where advice ranges from 30 seconds to three minutes. But a 2016 study published in **The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research** suggests longer rest intervals may be more beneficial than shorter breaks. That study compared 21 young resistance-trained men assigned to a group that performed resistance training programs with one-minute rest intervals between sets and a second group that performed

resistance training with three-minute rest intervals. Results varied depending on the resistance activity each group was engaged in, but muscle thickness in the anterior thigh among the three-minute rest interval group was significantly greater, and that three-minute group also experienced greater increases in the triceps brachii than their one-minute rest interval counterparts. Authors behind the study ultimately concluded that longer rest periods promote greater increases in muscle strength and hypertrophy in young resistance-trained men.



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Walk your way to better overall health



eople turn to many different exercises and pieces of fitness equipment to get in shape and lose weight. What they may not realize is that one of the most effective health strategies requires no additional gear except a quality pair of athletic shoes. Walking is one of the easiest and most accessible activities that can improve overall health. In fact. walking is now being touted as "the closest thing we have to a wonder drug," according to Dr. Thomas Frieden, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Indeed. walking offers a host of benefits. including:

- Reduces the risk of developing breast cancer by as much as 14 percent, according to the American Cancer Society.
- Helps a person maintain a healthy weight and lose body fat.
- Improves cardiovascular fitness by strengthening the

heart.

- Improves muscle endurance.
- Helps to prevent or manage conditions like stroke, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and type 2 diabetes, according to the Mayo Clinic
- Boosts immune function to make a person less susceptible to common viruses like the cold and flu.
- Eases joint pain associated with arthritis, and can even prevent osteoarthritis from developing in the first place, according to Harvard Health.
- Helps tame cravings for sweets and other fattening or sugary foods.

The faster and more frequently a person walks, the greater the benefits. One also can alternate periods of leisurely walking with brisk walking as a form of interval training to burn more calories and improve cardiovascular fitness.



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