

17 CONVINCING REASONS TO EXERCISE TODAY

Posted by SilverSneakers Fitness | March 17, 2017

THE BENEFITS OF BEING ACTIVE GO WAY BEYOND WEIGHT LOSS. HERE'S EXACTLY HOW YOUR BODY AND BRAIN WILL CHANGE FOR THE BETTER.

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By Barbara Brody

While there are plenty of people who really (truly!) love to exercise, you might not be one of them—and that's okay. Many of us need a little extra push to make exercise a regular habit or convince ourselves to stick with it. But the good news is that you shouldn't have to dig too deep to find motivation: There are tons of great reasons to get and stay active. Weight loss, perhaps surprisingly, isn't even on our list. Get up, get moving, and reap these rewards right now.

1. YOU'LL GET AN INSTANT ENERGY BOOST

When you're feeling drained, no one can blame you for wanting to curl up on the couch with a book

or in front of the TV. But that's a mistake. "Some people worry that they don't have the energy to exercise, but they miss the boat because doing it will energize them," says Lyssie Lakatos, R.D.N., C.D.N., a dietitian, personal trainer, and co-author of *The Nutrition Twins' Veggie Cure*. "It gets your blood flowing, delivers oxygen throughout your body, wakes you up, and makes you feel alive so you feel ready to take on any challenge."

2. IT HELPS FIGHT DEPRESSION

Exercise can work better than medication in some cases and is a phenomenal stress management tool for everyone, says Tom Rifai, M.D., regional medical director of metabolic health and weight management at Henry Ford Health System. Indeed, studies have found that people with mild to moderate depression who opt for regular exercise fare just as well as those who take antidepressant medication. Meanwhile, other research has shown that people who rely on a prescription can still benefit from adding exercise to the mix: Just 20 minutes of activity three times per week is enough to do the trick.

3. IT STRENGTHENS YOUR BONES

Thinning bones can become a major problem as you age, and osteoporosis is incredibly common. One in three women over age 50 and one in five men experience osteoporotic fractures, according to the International Osteoporosis Foundation. These painful fractures can put you on the path to permanent disability. A simple prescription: Do some strength training twice per week, says Wayne Westcott, Ph.D., professor of exercise science at Quincy College. In addition to improving bone density, weight-bearing exercise improves muscle strength and balance, which helps prevent falls and reduces the risk of fractures.

4. IT KEEPS YOU MENTALLY SHARP

It's okay to put down the crossword puzzles. Exercising your body may be just as important as exercising your mind if your goal is to ward off dementia. Getting just one hour of exercise per week seems to cut the risk of Alzheimer's substantially, according to research published in *The Lancet Neurology*.

5. IT KEEPS YOU REGULAR

Feeling a little backed up? “Exercise is one of the best ways to fight constipation. It stimulates movement in the intestinal tract, helping to move waste out of the system,” Lakatos says. Slowly increasing your daily physical activity may be important for people who suffer from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), according to the American College of Gastroenterology.

6. YOU’LL FEEL LESS ANXIOUS

Stressed about a work deadline, family conflict, or getting back on the dating scene? Lace up your sneakers. “Exercising is the ultimate natural way to fight anxiety and boost your mood. Exercise kicks your body’s feel-good chemicals—your endorphins—into high gear,” Lakatos says.

7. YOUR SEX LIFE WILL IMPROVE

Not only will you look better, which may improve self-confidence in and out of the bedroom, but exercise actually “makes sex better, including performance, stamina, arousal, and libido,” says Michael Dansinger, M.D., director of the lifestyle coaching program for diabetes and weight loss at Tufts Medical Center. Plus, one study found that men who work out have a lower incidence of impotency and erectile dysfunction. Vigorous exercise—the equivalent of walking two miles or burning 200 extra calories per day—was most effective.

8. YOU’LL SLASH YOUR DIABETES RISK

Physical activity helps keep blood glucose levels in check, so it reduces your chances of developing type 2 diabetes. That’s true even if it doesn’t lead to weight loss, Dr. Rifai says. And if you already have diabetes, you should know that regular exercise can help you manage your condition and lower the risk of complications like eye disease or nerve damage. If you have diabetes, talk to your doctor about which exercises are best for you.

9. YOU’LL BE LESS LIKELY TO HAVE A HEART ATTACK OR

STROKE

Lack of exercise is among the five major risk factors for cardiovascular disease, according to the American Heart Association (AHA). There are many reasons why exercise is so important for your heart and blood vessels: Aside from combating obesity, exercise lowers levels of LDL (often called “bad”) cholesterol, raises the HDL (“good”) cholesterol, and controls blood pressure. The [AHA recommends](#) getting at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity (or 75 minutes of intense aerobic activity) over the course of each week, plus doing some type of strength training at least twice per week.

10. IT PRESERVES MUSCLE MASS

Muscle matters, even if you don't care about becoming a body builder or looking toned in a bikini. After age 30, physically inactive people can lose as much as 8 percent of their muscle mass per decade, and it accelerates even more after age 70. If you want to continue picking up your grandkids and grocery bags, fight back now by making strength training part of your routine.

11. YOU'LL SLEEP BETTER

Research has shown that regular exercisers tend to have less trouble falling asleep and staying asleep compared to those who are sedentary. Ideally, it's best to exercise in the morning or afternoon so that you don't get your heart rate and body temperature up too close to bedtime. But a large poll conducted by the Sleep Foundation found that most people aren't too bothered by evening workouts, and that those who exercise at any time of day snooze better than those who aren't active.

12. IT PREVENTS BACK PAIN

Numerous studies have found that regular exercise helps keep low back pain at bay. If you're prone to backaches, it's a good idea to focus on stretching and strengthening the muscles in your back. You'll also want to strengthen your core muscles, since they help support your spine. If you've had a back injury or you're currently experiencing pain, ask your doctor or a physical therapist for guidance.

13. IT OFFERS RELIEF FOR ACHY JOINTS

It might seem like having sore knees or hips would be a pretty good excuse for sitting still, but that's not the case: Exercise gets rid of stiffness and alleviates pain in arthritis sufferers. Your main goals should be to stay limber while strengthening the muscles that surround any troublesome joints. Not sure how to get started? The Arthritis Foundation offers specific routines and [workout videos](#) that you can view online.

14. IT HELPS YOU STAY SOCIAL

Why meet friends for dinner or grab a coffee when you can take a walk or do a Zumba class together? "Exercise is a great way to connect without sitting down to eat, and it takes the pressure out of spending money or adding calories that you don't need," says fitness expert and workout video star Andrea Metcalf. Trying new fitness classes or joining a gym might also help introduce you to some new companions.

15. IT HELPS YOU RETAIN YOUR INDEPENDENCE AS YOU AGE

You're less likely to have trouble doing your own grocery shopping, catching a show at the theater, and just going about daily life if you start doing a combination of aerobic and easy strength-training moves now, according to a recent study published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

16. YOU'LL LIVE LONGER

Research published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* confirms what you might have suspected: People who never exercise die sooner than those who are often on the move. In a perfect world, you should log at least 150 minutes of moderate activity each week, since doing so cuts your risk of premature death by 31 percent. But if you can't hit that target, don't panic: As long as you do some amount of regular exercise, you'll lower your risk by 20 percent.

17. YOU MIGHT ACCOMPLISH THINGS YOU NEVER THOUGHT YOU COULD

Barbara Lewin, R.D.N., an integrative health and sports nutritionist, says she often coaches aspiring teenage tennis champions and 20-something Olympic contenders—but she also works with an 85-year-old who just completed her first marathon. The takeaway: It's never too late to cross that finish line, whether your goal is to compete in a race, take up kickboxing, or climb a mountain.



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