

# NIH News in Health

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## Get Moving and Stay Healthy Make Physical Activity Part of Your Life

Those busy with work and school, two-career couples, single parents—really, whoever you are, people from all walks of life find it difficult to get enough exercise. But research shows that all Americans need physical activity for good health. New government guidelines can help you get started and stay active.

The government recently released the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* to help you live longer, feel better and help yourself and the country. “We have a crisis in health care funding in this country,” says Acting Surgeon General Dr. Steven Galson. “We need to make sure that we’re doing everything possible as a nation to keep our population healthy, not just because it’ll help people fulfill their goals for themselves, but also because of the financial crunch facing the country in health care.”

Regular physical activity improves your overall health and fitness. It can help reduce high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and other risk factors for disease. That means physical activity can play a role in preventing many diseases, including heart disease, stroke, some cancers, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and depression.

Physical activity can also improve your ability to do the things you need to each day. It builds muscle strength and endurance, which may help prevent injuries and make it easier for you to climb stairs and get up from chairs. It can also help you think more clearly.

“It takes some effort to get physically active,” Galson says. But you

don’t have to get physical activity every day. The recently released recommendations say that exercise can be measured in weekly totals.

“The goal is to get at least 2½ hours of physical activity every single week,” Galson says. He notes this is different from previous guidelines that recommended getting a certain amount of physical activity every day. With the new guidelines, if you’ve missed a few days, you can still catch up on the weekends.

Galson also advises Americans to make a habit of fitting physical activity into their routines. “This has to be a permanent change for every American if we’re going to really keep up with the recommended levels of physical activity.”

So what exactly is physical activity? There are 2 types of activities included in the recommendations: aerobic and muscle-strengthening. Aerobic activities—also called endurance activities—are those in which you move your large muscles rhythmically for a long time.



There are different levels of aerobic activity. With moderate-intensity aerobic activities, you can talk while you do them, but not sing. Examples include walking briskly, water

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aerobics, ballroom or line dancing, general gardening or sports where you catch and throw. With vigorous-intensity activities, you can only say a few words before pausing to catch your breath. These include jogging, swimming laps, aerobic dancing, sports with a lot of running, and heavy gardening such as continuous digging or hoeing.

Muscle-strengthening happens when your muscles do more work than they are used to. Activities that strengthen muscle include heavy gardening, lifting weights, push-ups on

the floor or against the wall, sit-ups and working with resistance bands (long, wide rubber strips that stretch).

Try out a variety of different activities. "You can enjoy activities with friends, with family, with co-workers," says Dr. Ashley Wilder Smith at NIH's National Cancer Institute (NCI), who helped write the guidelines. "There are lots of ways to have physical activity enhance your life."

"We recognize that many people in the country are very inactive," says NCI's Dr. Richard Troiano, a captain in the Public Health Service who also helped create the guidelines. "Even moving from 30 minutes a week to 90 minutes a week, there's a reduction of 20% in death from all causes.... So a little bit of change results in a lot of benefit."

The experts agree that some physical activity, no matter how much, is better than none. You get substantial health benefits from at least 2½ hours a week of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity. For more extensive health benefits, increase your aerobic physical activity to 5 hours a week of moderate-intensity or 2½ hours of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity.

So how do you change? How can you start? Smith stresses the "Start Low and Go Slow" slogan in the consumer publication based on the new guidelines, *Be Active Your Way: A Guide for Adults*. "We have a number of scenarios for folks who are just starting," she says.

For example, walk a little more to

**Web Links**

For links to more information about the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*, see this story online:

<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2009/April/feature1.htm>

the bus stop on your way to work, or park your car at the far end of the parking lot. Start with a 10-minute walk a couple of times a week. As you get used to it, increase the walk to 15, 20 and 30 minutes per day. When you reach 30 minutes per day, 5 days a week, you're meeting the minimum recommended activity level.

"There's a continuum of effort," Troiano says. "But because so much of our population is really at the very low end of activity, just getting people to move a little bit more will provide a tremendous benefit."

Many people who are just starting an exercise program or adding physical activity into their lives often wonder whether they need their doctor's permission. Smith says, "In the absence of a chronic condition or health-related symptoms, everyone should feel comfortable moving toward and working incrementally up to the guidelines. And you don't necessarily need your doctor's approval for that. We don't want people to feel like there's a gate in the way of them starting an exercise program."

"It's important for everyone, including people who have disabilities and kids," Acting Surgeon General Galson reminds us. "Everyone can get physical activity in their own way, and it will help their health."

So what are you waiting for? The *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* can help you get started now. In addition to guidelines for adults, there are guidelines for children and adolescents, older adults, and considerations for pregnant women and

people with disabilities. For more information, visit [www.health.gov/PAGuidelines](http://www.health.gov/PAGuidelines). ■

**Wise Choices Getting Active**

- Team up with a friend. It will keep you motivated and be more fun.
- Pick activities that you like to do.
- Join a fitness group.
- Track your time and progress. It helps you stay on course.
- Talk to your health care provider about good activities to try.
- Ask the worksite wellness coordinator at your job for tips and advice.
- Don't forget muscle-strengthening activities for additional health benefits.

**NIH News in Health (ISSN 1556-3898)****National Institutes of Health**

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# Remember To Take Your Pills?

## Jog Your Memory of What To Take and When

We forget things every day—people’s names, our keys or whether we locked the front door. But when it comes to taking your medicines, don’t let your memory fail you. Taking medicines the right way could mean the difference between life and death. You can take simple steps to remember what medicines to take, and when to take them.

“Keeping track of different medications can be a problem for everybody, whether you’re young or old,” says Dr. Marie Bernard, deputy director of NIH’s National Institute on Aging. “But as you get older, you tend to have more illnesses, so it’s likely you’ll need to take more medications.”

Unfortunately, aging often brings a gradual loss of memory, which can make it even harder to keep track of your medications. The more you know about your medicines and the

more you talk with your doctor, the easier it will be to avoid problems.

Many experts recommend making a list of all the medications you need to take. For each medicine, include how much you need to take, the time of day you should take it, what it’s for and the name of the doctor who prescribed it. You can turn this list into a daily checklist and

post it in an obvious place in your house—like the refrigerator or your medicine cabinet.

Taking your medicines should become part of your daily routine. For instance, you might take one medication every morning after you brush your teeth, and a different one at night before you climb into bed.

Try using pillboxes that have pills distributed into different compartments according to the day of the week and the time of day they should be taken. Carefully fill the pill organizer at the start of each week with the correct amount of medicines. Get a health professional, friend or relative to help if this task is confusing.

“You can also ask your physician to try to give you the simplest medication regimen possible—maybe once-a-day dosing or perhaps combination medications—so you won’t have as many different medications to remember,” Bernard suggests.

Technology can be helpful too. Cell phones, programmable wristwatches and other types of timers can remind you when it’s time to take your medications. You could also try



a phone service or a scheduling program on the computer if you’re usually near a phone or on the computer when it’s time to take your medicine.

“Some new technologies have timers on the medicine bottles, to remind you when it’s time to take your medication. And for people who have the resources, new technologies allow a recording to go to a doctor’s office, or to a loved one’s home, to let them know whether a person is taking medication as directed,” Bernard says.

“We live in a wonderful age where there are a lot of good medications that can help a lot of conditions,” says Bernard. “But medications must be taken as prescribed, and always in careful coordination with your health care provider.” ■



### Wise Choices Tips to Remember Your Medicines

- Make a checklist of all the prescription and over-the-counter medicines you need to take each day.
- Post your checklist in an obvious location in your home. Keep another copy in your wallet or purse.
- Use a pillbox that keeps track of a week’s worth of medications.
- Make taking medicines part of your daily routine.
- Try to fill all your prescriptions at the same pharmacy, so all your records are in one place.
- Talk to your doctor about all the medications, remedies and vitamins you use. Your doctor can make sure they’ll work together safely and effectively.



### Web Links

For links to more about taking your medicines, see this story online:  
<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2009/April/feature2.htm>



# Health Capsules

For links to more information about these topics, visit this page online:  
<http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2009/April/capsules.htm>

## Study Questions Prostate Cancer Test

The prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test can spot prostate cancer early. But surprisingly, annual PSA tests may not lead to fewer prostate cancer deaths, a new study suggests.

Some doctors advise men 50 and older to take the PSA test each year, but others are concerned about the downside. PSA tests may give false-positive results or find slow-growing tumors that will never cause serious

problems. Follow-up tests and procedures can have serious side effects.

To see how annual PSA screening affects death rates, NIH-funded scientists studied more than 76,000 men. Half the men received PSA tests for 6 years and then **digital rectal exams** for 4 years. The other men were given no recommendations about prostate cancer screening.

After 10 years, 17% more prostate cancers were diagnosed in the screening group. However, there was no significant difference in the death rates between the 2 groups.

“What this report tells us is that there may be some men who are diagnosed with prostate cancer and

have the side effects of treatment, such as impotence and incontinence, with little chance of benefit,” said Dr. John E. Niederhuber, director of NIH’s National Cancer Institute.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recently concluded that there wasn’t enough evidence to make a recommendation about prostate cancer screening for men younger than 75. For men 75 and older, they recommend against screening. Their assessment, however, was released before the new reports came out. Because of the uncertainties, NIH will continue to study different ways to screen for prostate cancer. ■



### Definitions

#### Digital rectal exams

A doctor uses a gloved finger to feel for abnormal areas in the rectum.

## Vitamin C May Ward Off Gout

High levels of vitamin C may reduce your risk of gout, according to a new study. Still, experts say you should talk to your doctor before making big changes to your vitamin intake.

Gout affects about 3 million adults—mostly men—nationwide. It develops when your blood has too much uric acid, which can form tiny crystals in the bloodstream. The crystals can lodge in your joints and cause swelling and pain. Left untreated over time, gout can permanently damage your joints.

Earlier research suggested that high doses of vitamin C could reduce the blood’s uric acid levels. But it wasn’t clear if the vitamin would also reduce the risk of gout. To find out, NIH-funded scientists studied about

47,000 men for 20 years. None had gout when the study began, but it developed later in 1,317 of the men.

By the end of the study, men who had the highest vitamin C intake—at least 1,500 milligrams per day—had a 45% lower risk of gout than those with the smallest intake—less than 250 milligrams per day. However, the lowest-risk group took significantly more vitamin C than the recommended daily intake of 90 milligrams. These high daily doses can cause side effects.

It’s possible that other factors might account for the low risk of gout among men who take high doses of vitamin C. More research is needed to be certain that the vitamin can help reduce the risk of gout. ■



### Featured Web Site Rethinking Drinking

<http://RethinkingDrinking.niaaa.nih.gov>

This web site offers research-based information about how your drinking habits may affect your health. Learn to recognize the signs of alcohol problems and ways to cut back or quit drinking. Interactive tools can help you calculate the calories and alcohol content of drinks.

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