



# Add Days to Your Life **AND** Life to Your Days

**L**ife expectancy is at its all-time high, the fact that so many people are living longer, well into their 80s and 90s is a wonderful ideal. However, the sad reality is that living longer doesn't always include a good quality of life, it's not a package deal.

Many people outlive their children and their pensions, and end up feeling like they've become a financial, physical and emotional burden on their families. Swallowing handfuls of pills every day, losing independence and requiring nursing care is not the way most people would choose to spend their last years.

However, there are steps you can take to reduce the risk of this outcome. Making a conscious decision to take small steps (literally) from today, could make all the difference in your life going forward.

Physical activity, when performed regularly, has been proven to prevent and help manage more than 20 chronic conditions. These include coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, cancer, obesity, mental health problems and musculoskeletal conditions. Sadly, you can't bank the benefits of exercise from your youth. Ideally being active throughout your lifespan would give optimal health benefits, however research has shown the health gains achieved through physical activity can be attained at any time. So, it doesn't matter when you start, as long as you start!

Now we're certainly not saying you have to sign up for an IronMan Ultra-Triathlon or become the next Crossfit Superhuman. Physical activity includes all forms of exercise, such as everyday walking or cycling to get from A to B, active play, work-related activity and active recreation; such as working out in a gym, dancing, gardening or playing active games, as well as organised and competitive sport.

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING INACTIVE?

Physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for death. The latest research shows that a sedentary life is as great a risk factor as smoking and obesity, for heart disease risk. Sedentary behaviour is not simply a lack of activity but a cluster of individual behaviours where sitting or lying is the dominant mode of posture, and energy expenditure is very low.

Inactivity was always associated as

a cause of being overweight or obese, which in turn results in an increased risk of heart disease and diabetes. However, the most current research has shown that even normal weight individuals that are inactive, are at risk of developing disease.

While you can blame it on your job or school that forces you to sit for hours in a day, you can also mitigate the negative effects with just 60-75 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity a day.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU EXERCISE?

Research has shown that regular physical activity results in:

- ① **Improved health-related physical fitness** - lung capacity, and resting heart rate for example
- ② **Increased exercise tolerance and functional status** - your body copes better and moves more efficiently, with activity
- ③ **Improved body composition** - protect against obesity, reduced fatty tissue, improved weight control
- ④ **Enhanced lipid lipoprotein profiles** - reduced triglycerides (fats), higher HDL cholesterol, lower LDL to HDL ratios
- ⑤ **Improved glucose homeostasis and insulin sensitivity** – better blood sugar control
- ⑥ **Reduced blood pressure**
- ⑦ **Improved autonomic tone** – processes that maintains chemical balance in your body regulating things like heart muscle tone, blood vessels tone, gut tone, glands etc.
- ⑧ **Decreased blood coagulation** – reducing the risk of clot formation
- ⑨ **Improved heart blood flow**
- ⑩ **Improved heart function**
- ⑪ **Enhanced endothelial function** – the inner lining of your blood vessels
- ⑫ **Reduced systemic inflammation** – a key risk factor for some cancers and development of atherosclerosis (narrowing of the arteries and plaque formation)
- ⑬ **Improved psychological well-being and mental health**
- ⑭ **Weight control or loss**
- ⑮ **Stronger bones** – increases in bone density which protects bones from fractures
- ⑯ **Joint health** – strong muscles providing better support for joints
- ⑰ **Improved balance and stability on your feet** – stronger muscles and joints as well as better nerve recruitment improves balance and reduces the risk of falls and subsequent fractures.



## WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN FOR ME?

Regardless of your activity starting point, there are benefits to be gained for anyone who increases their activity levels. Individuals that follow the recommended physical activity guidelines have shown to have optimal health benefits of a 39% reduced risk of dying from any disease. However, anything is better than nothing – even doing half the amount of the recommended weekly activity has shown a 20% lower risk of mortality.

Regular physical activity roughly halves your chance of developing some cancers, like bowel and breast cancer. Studies have shown that people who continued to exercise once diagnosed with cancer had significantly less cancer deaths and any-cause death than those who were inactive.

Fundamentally, regardless of your body weight, people who are more physically active can have a life expectancy of 4.5 years more, compared with those who are inactive. Understandably, it's all about the quality of life that comes with that. Why live longer if you are going to be bed-ridden following a stroke or fall, requiring care, restricted to wheelchairs, unable to travel easily, play with children or enjoy socialising? Not to mention the financial and emotional burden that brings.

By reducing your blood pressure, cholesterol and better controlling blood sugars, exercise has been shown to be more effective than pharmaceutical agents in some cases. This could benefit your daily life in being less dependent on medication (and all its side effects) and have fewer pills to swallow.

Physical activity promotes mental health and well-being by preventing mental health problems. Exercise can reduce the risk of depression, dementia and Alzheimer's, as well as enhance psychological well-being, by improving self-perception and self-esteem, mood, sleep quality, and by reducing levels of anxiety, fatigue and even anger. Exercise stimulates the release of endorphins, essentially happy hormones, which can have a mood-altering effect.

Friendships and strong relationships are a key factor to living longer. Being able to socialise and interact with others, join in with group classes and activities, and meeting new people goes a long way to keeping you young as you age.

There is a 'gold standard' of how much physical activity you should be doing every day to achieve the optimal benefits mentioned above. Ask your therapist for a copy. We suggest making activity, in any form, part of your daily life and from there slowly increase it towards that 'gold standard'.

## WHAT ABOUT THE KIDS?

The benefits of exercise for children are endless, not just healthy growth and motor skills but social and psychological too. Interestingly children are 3.5 to 6 times more likely to exercise or play sport if one or both parents participate in regular physical activity. Set the right example for your children and the whole family will benefit from exercise.

## ARE THERE ANY RISKS WITH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

The risks associated with taking part in physical activity are low and continuing with a sedentary lifestyle presents a much greater health risk than gradually increasing your activity level.

## THE LAST WORD

So, regardless of your age or any pre-existing medical condition, and regardless of your base level of fitness or activity, the benefits of being more active on a daily basis substantially outweigh any risks or concerns you may have. It's up to you to take that first step!

Don't just think of exercise benefits as adding days to your life, more importantly the focus should be on adding life to your days. Don't be overwhelmed, this can be achieved in many small steps done each day.



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