

# Physical activity is easier than you think...



**FLEXIBILITY, EFFECTIVENESS AND FUN**

**THE MANY BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

For many women, everyday life itself resembles a form of extreme sports. We must care for aging parents, go to a job that is often very demanding, do a large share of the household chores, and so on. And we do it all at the breakneck pace typical of the modern world. So, you may ask, how do I fit in time for physical fitness? I might as well give up eating and sleeping!

Yet, even with a tight schedule, you can be active in your own way every day. Want a few tips on how to be more physically active? As much as you can, build physical activity into your daily routine. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Leave the car at home, or park it a little further away from your destination. Instead of coffee with a friend, take a walk together. Plant a garden or rake the leaves. Do stretching or strengthening exercises while you're watching TV. Simple steps like these can produce major health benefits.

The importance of physical activity in maintaining and improving your quality of life and health can never be stressed enough. And, the good news is that whatever your age or past habits, it's never too late to start fitting a little physical activity in your daily routine.

*The benefits of regular physical activity are enormous during menopause. For instance, it is a strong ally in terms of restoring and maintaining healthy adrenal function. The adrenal glands\* are essential to your ability to tolerate stress. During menopause, healthy adrenal function is especially important because it helps you to better manage the tensions that may arise during this period of change. Also, the adrenal glands replace the hormonal system in part by producing several sex hormones (estrogen, progesterone and androgens).*

\*The adrenal glands, located above the kidneys, secrete sex hormones, and hormones that place the body in a state of readiness for action, among them adrenaline and cortisol.

Did you know that you don't have to do a long session of uninterrupted physical activity to get health benefits? Three 10-minute sessions over the day are just as good as one 30-minute workout. Focus above all on **regularity** (up to an hour every day, throughout the year), **perseverance**, and adapted **intensity**, meaning activity that makes you breathe hard.

Since 2000, the "**intermittent exercise**" training method has been the subject of many studies that have praised its benefits. The method consists of alternating periods of fairly intensive physical activity—for instance, a sprint lasting between 10 seconds and 1 minute, fast jogging for 1 to 3 minutes, or slower jogging from 3 to 15 minutes—with periods of rest (stopping or walking).

Intermittent exercise is considered to be more effective than continuous exercise in improving maximal aerobic capacity and the cardiovascular system, as well as reducing blood vessel stiffness and lowering blood pressure at rest. In overweight or obese people, it is also a more effective way to lose weight and abdominal fat mass.

Also, people seem to like intermittent exercise more than continuous exercise. They find that it is less monotonous, seems to require less effort, and makes them feel more motivated! The benefits of this approach are recognized by the Montreal Heart Institute's ÉPIC Centre, which has been offering classes since 2009.\*

\*Gayda, M. (2011). "Intérêt et avantages de l'exercice intermittent," published online by the "Blogue du Dr. Martin Juneau" [[http://www.docteurmartin-juneau.com/blog/articles/exercice\\_intermittent-2011-01-14.html](http://www.docteurmartin-juneau.com/blog/articles/exercice_intermittent-2011-01-14.html)]. (Accessed 14-03-2012.)

## Physiological Advantages of Physical Activity

### Digestive System

- ☀ Facilitates better digestion by helping your body absorb nutrients such as the vitamins, minerals and proteins

### Musculoskeletal System

- ☀ Improves posture, balance, flexibility, agility, endurance and coordination
- ☀ Tones muscles
- ☀ Slows bone loss, especially when exercise is performed with weights; strengthens bones and maximizes their calcium absorption capacity, and helps to prevent osteoporosis
- ☀ Maintains or increases mobility and independence and reduces the risk of falls, fractures, back pain, and other injuries

### Circulatory and Cardiovascular System

- ☀ Improves blood vessels' ability to expand with exertion and increases the capacity of muscles to use oxygen (which increases our physical work capacity)
- ☀ Lowers blood pressure
- ☀ Raises "good" blood cholesterol (HDL) level
- ☀ Helps to reduce risk of stroke and heart attack
- ☀ Contributes to weight control by stimulating the basal metabolism (energy expended at rest) and reducing the percentage of body fat
- ☀ May lower the frequency and intensity of hot flashes linked to menopause
- ☀ Reduces breathlessness due to exertion, maintains respiratory capacity

### Immune System

- ☀ Fosters good immune system function and better sleep, and enables the elimination of toxins through perspiration

### Cognitive System

- ☀ Improves intellectual function, which is the brain's capacity to process information correctly
- ☀ Reduces reaction time
- ☀ Improves concentration and coordination

### Infection Prevention

- ☀ Reduces the risk of developing noncommunicable diseases such as breast or colon cancer, type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer Disease and Parkinson's Disease

## Psychological Advantages of Physical Activity

- ☀ Improves mood and sense of well-being, self-confidence, self-esteem, and stimulates the libido
- ☀ Diminishes anxiety, fatigue, stress, insomnia and depression
- ☀ Helps to reduce the isolation of some women
- ☀ Can be done with family and friends
- ☀ Helps people recognize their strengths and limitations

## Advantages after Medical Treatment

- ☀ Known to prevent lymphedema, in particular, after breast cancer treatment (surgery or radiation therapy): get professional advice on the most appropriate types of exercise
- ☀ Aids recovery after heart surgery

⇒ **Note:** The tendency to medicalize menopause and a host of other minor problems that we encounter over our lives has many negative effects on women's health and quality of life. Some important studies have shown that physical activity—accessible to everyone, simple, economical, and offering quick and positive results—is more effective than many drug-based interventions that are expensive and may jeopardize our health.\* In addition, unlike drugs, moderate physical activity has no unpleasant side effects other than occasional muscle pain!

\*Northrup, C. (2012). *The Wisdom of Menopause: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing During the Change*, Bantam Dell: New York, 2001.



## HELPFUL TIPS

⇒ **Focus on variety.** To get the most benefit from physical exercise, you should ideally combine or alternate different types of activity. As much as you can, try to exercise every part of your body: get everything moving!

⇒ **Drink enough water and adjust your diet.** Make sure you drink enough water before, during and after physical activity. To prevent discomfort and optimize your energy, it is a good idea to eat several hours before starting your activity and have a small snack such as fruit, yogurt, or cereal an hour before exercising. After you have finished, you can eat another snack that includes protein, because protein is needed to repair muscle damage.

⇒ **Warm up.** The warm up is an essential low intensity exercise to prepare the body for a physically demanding activity and lower the risk of injury. Warm-up exercises include slow and repeated rotations of the joints, walking slowly, jumping jacks, and running slowly; add some knee lifts and heel-to-buttock stretches.

⇒ **Listen to your body.** Adapt the duration and intensity of your physical activity to how you're feeling and the time of day. For instance, avoid excessive physical exertion, especially when your body is tired.

⇒ **Recover.** If you're sore after exercising, allow your body a chance to recover before you do more exercise of similar intensity. Do some gentle stretches, take a hot bath, and do low intensity exercises until the soreness or stiffness is gone.

⇒ **Note:** In the case of injuries such as a sprain, torn muscle, fracture, or dislocation, stop the activity immediately; raise the injured limb to reduce any bleeding; apply ice to reduce inflammation; wrap the injured area; call for medical help.



more beneficial  
than you think!

*"You don't have to go to a fitness centre, pool or sports facility to be physically active . . . Walking is probably the most common and highly recommended form of exercise and it's totally free."*

*World Health Organization*



*Our capacity for physical exercise varies a lot depending on our state of health and past habits. Start slowly, and gradually increase your level of physical activity, focusing more on perseverance and regularity than the number or intensity of the activities you select.*



*Physical activity, like a healthy and balanced diet, can improve your health considerably. In fact, a society that promotes physical activity will reduce its rate of chronic illnesses and premature death. The time has come for our political leaders to firmly commit to improving access to recreational and sports facilities and fostering urban planning that promotes active lifestyles.*

**Benefits:** improves mood, self-esteem and intellectual function; diminishes the effects of stress and reduces insomnia; may counter menopause-related irritability, anxiety and hot flashes; lowers risk of developing illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer and Parkinson's; helps control weight, stimulates the libido, and contributes significantly to overall physical and mental well-being.

**Advantages compared to other treatments:** can be built into your daily routine, even if you have a tight schedule; accessible to everyone and inexpensive or free.

**Side effects:** high risk of dependency on the feelings of well-being and happiness it provides.

Is this a description of a new miracle pill? Not at all. These are just some of the effects of physical activity on your health and quality of life!

## Find out More

Check out *L'activité physique* [French only], available on the website of the Réseau québécois d'action pour la santé des femmes (RQASF): [www.rqasf.qc.ca](http://www.rqasf.qc.ca). It contains lots of information and tools to help women make informed choices about their health and have a better experience of menopause.

Other resources:

\*BOSTON WOMEN'S HEALTH BOOK COLLECTIVE (BWHBC). *Our Bodies, Ourselves, Menopause*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2006

\*The Public Health Agency of Canada website: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pa-ap/index-eng.php>



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# PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

« Any age  
is a good  
age to do  
something  
good for  
yourself »

