

Top 10 Reasons to Exercise

Exercise may be the closest thing to the fountain of youth. Not only does regular activity strengthen your muscles and improve heart and lung function, but it can also reduce your risk of major diseases, stimulate the growth of new brain cells, and even add years to your life. Studies show just 30 minutes of physical activity on most days is all that's required to reap big benefits.

The range of health bonuses now attributed to exercise has surprised even doctors. Research suggests that workouts may do the following:

1. **Keep you young.** Workouts such as brisk walking or cycling boost the amount of oxygen consumed during exercise. Improving your aerobic capacity by just 15 to 25 percent would be like shaving 10 to 20 years off your age. Aerobic exercise may also stimulate the growth of new brain cells in older adults.
2. **Reduce infections.** Moderate workouts temporarily rev-up the immune system by increasing the aggressiveness or capacity of immune cells. That may explain why people who exercise catch fewer colds.
3. **Prevent heart attacks.** Not only does exercise raise "good" HDL cholesterol and lower blood pressure, but new research shows it reduces arterial inflammation, another risk factor for heart attacks and strokes.
4. **Ease asthma.** New evidence shows that upper-body and breathing exercises can reduce the need to use an inhaler in mild cases of asthma.
5. **Control blood sugar.** Exercise helps maintain a healthy blood-sugar level by increasing the cells' sensitivity to insulin and by controlling weight. Regular brisk walking can significantly cut the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.
6. **Protect against cancer.** Exercise may reduce the risk of colon-cancer by speeding waste through the gut and lowering the insulin level. It may also protect against breast and prostate cancer by regulating hormone levels.
7. **Combat stress.** Regular aerobic exercise lowers levels of stress hormones. For many people, exercise helps relieve depression as effectively as antidepressant medication.
8. **Relieve hot flashes.** Increasing fitness by walking or practicing yoga enhances mood and reduces some menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes and night sweats.
9. **Protect men's health.** Pelvic exercises help prevent erectile dysfunction and possibly benign prostate enlargement, a common cause of urinary problems.
10. **Prolong life.** Studies lasting many years have consistently shown that being active cuts the risk of premature death by about 50 percent for men and women.

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