



Introduction To Exercise



Introduction To Exercise

How To Get And Stay Fit

If you're like the rest of the UK, with the New Year came your resolution to get fit. Unfortunately, the figures are against you: around 80% of such resolutions fail within the first 12 weeks.

But there's no need to become a statistic. First things first, let's address fitness resolutions, why they so often fail – and what you can do to keep your resolution alive.

Too Much Too Soon

Chris Tzar is an exercise physiologist and director of the Lifestyle Clinic at the University of New South Wales.

According to Chris, one of the major obstacles to resolution success is the 'more is more' attitude we adopt as we hurl our tired old bodies into our shiny new fitness programmes.



"The major reason for the 80% dropout rate is inappropriate exercise routines with too rapid a progression in terms of intensity, duration or both.

In other words, too much too soon," he explains. "As you get older, especially if you've been sedentary, your body needs time to adjust to new demands.

Introduction To Exercise

The classic example is getting shin splints from overdoing it – even just walking. This, as with other strain injuries, can cause a person actual discomfort with movement and consequently stop their program altogether.”

According to Chris, the moral of the story is to pace yourself to give your body a chance to adapt to its new routine. He suggests ways to do this below.

Unrealistic weight loss expectations can also cause disincentive, says Chris, causing many people to give up before they give their program a chance to kick in. “A realistic aim if weight loss is your goal is half a kilo a week. And remember, exercise alone won’t necessarily result in weight loss. Eating the correct type of food is vital to achieving long-term weight loss.

Remember, the more slowly you lose weight, the more likely it is to remain off in the long term.”

Starting Out On The Right Foot

To help avoid the too much too soon ‘burnout’, Chris suggests you first take a realistic look at your current general health and activity levels. “Nearly all of the most common chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular problems, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoarthritis or other musculoskeletal problems with knees or backs, respond very positively to the right type of exercise.

If you are affected, it’s all the more reason to get started – with professional help, of course.”

As far as health is concerned, Chris and our other experts all stress the importance of having a full health check with your GP before starting a new exercise regime.

If medical issues are identified, seek expert guidance from your GP or an accredited exercise physiologist. But don’t let such issues be a barrier to your fitness aims. Once you’ve consulted with your GP and are ready to begin, Chris suggests you get an objective picture of your current activity levels.

Introduction To Exercise



“This will give you a proper baseline measure both for charting your progress and to help you structure a program that steps you up at an appropriate pace,” he says.

To do this, Chris suggests keeping a seven-day ‘activity diary’ or wearing a pedometer and keeping a tally of your daily steps for a week.

If you choose the diary option, record all your physical activity, from structured walks or gym visits through to ‘incidental’ or everyday movement such as walking up stairs, to the shops, hanging the clothes on the line, gardening, performing essential household chores and so on.

Introduction To Exercise

Get With The Programme

Once you've established your normal activity levels, it's time to work on a program that steps those levels up gradually.

"There are 101 different ways to start a programme and all manner of activities that you can include in it," says Chris. "But we are aiming for what we call 'progressive overload'.

This means making sure you increase activity in increments – whether in time or intensity – that are not so high as to cause pain or injury, but high enough to have you feeling and seeing benefits over time."

If you are on a walking program, for example, Chris suggests that a realistic increase might be by around 20% every few weeks. So, if your original activity levels started at 5000 steps on your pedometer, up it by 1000 steps every few weeks, over time you will be doing the recommended 10,000 steps a day – without fear of overload.

"The value of this approach is that you pace yourself properly and get fitter without injury or burnout. Once you reach a higher level of fitness, you may then want to go further, take up a more intensive gym program, perhaps do some running or bike riding and so on," says Chris. "And if you do choose to go further, the same principle of progressive overload applies."

Resistance Is Not Futile

By now, most of us have heard about the benefits of resistance or weight training. Increased muscle mass achieved through this training can boost your metabolic rate, helping you burn more energy while at rest and aiding your body's ability to keep glucose at steady levels.

This helps prevent or reduce the effects of diabetes and offers cholesterol and blood pressure lowering benefits, too.

Introduction To Exercise



In addition, being stronger aids balance and mobility, a real benefit as you get older, helping prevent injury due to falls and enabling you to continue to do all the everyday tasks you need to without relying on outside help.

But what does weight training entail? Does it mean hours sweating in the gym with barbells and bodybuilders?

Not at all, says Belinda Parmenter, an accredited exercise physiologist currently undertaking a PhD relating to exercise for people with chronic conditions. "Of course, programs vary according to the needs of the person concerned," she says.

"However, typically, they will involve movements that are targeted to strengthen the major muscle groups of the body. The weights concerned may be quite light – a kilo or so – or heavy – 20 or 30 kilos or more.

We might prescribe eight or more different exercises, in three lots or 'sets' of anything from three to 20 repetitions of each, depending on the needs and health of the person concerned."

Introduction To Exercise

Once you are shown the right moves and have the weights at hand, you can work through a program in your home if the gym does not suit you.

Belinda stresses that while the advantages of increased mobility and balance may come from using lighter weights, higher intensity work with heavier weights is required to get the metabolic benefits.

Either way, no serious fitness program is complete without its resistance training component, so factor that in. A session or two with an accredited fitness trainer or exercise physiologist can put you on the right track.

Never Sit Still

All three of our experts also pointed to the latest research indicating that the physical activity/benefit equation is more complex than first realised. Daryl Sadgrove is also an accredited exercise physiologist and director of Movement Medicine, a company based in Wollongong, NSW.

“All the latest evidence is that it’s not simply being physically active that is important for your health. Rather, it’s limiting sedentary behaviour,” he explains.

“It is now increasingly clear that people who are still for lengthy periods – say at a computer or TV – are prone to negative effects due to the release of harmful substances by the body, seemingly in response to these periods of inactivity.

So it appears that even if you do your 30 minutes of brisk walking a day and remain immobile for four or more hours a day, you are still subject to those ill effects.”

According to all three of our experts, the key is to increase your everyday activity – you’ve heard it before: take the stairs, not the lift, park further away from your destination, never ride when you can walk and so on. It is all about seeing the need to move as an opportunity, not a chore.

Introduction To Exercise

They also suggest that you make sure you break up any still hours at work or leisure with some considered movement. Get up in the ad breaks and do some squats, lunges or star jumps. Take a brisk walk around the block every hour or so while working at the computer. Program activity into your inactive hours.

Daryl also suggests you use time at home or the office to work on your balance. “Balance is the quickest thing to improve when it comes to training and it’s so important to help guard against injury and increase your mobility,” he says.

“Simply standing on one leg for 30 seconds each leg each day can make a real difference. And that couldn’t be easier to factor into anyone’s day.”

“It really is these smaller, constant everyday movements that make a big difference to your energy expenditure – and the more we are finding out, the bigger the difference appears to be,” agrees Belinda.

Staying The Course: list, research and plan for adversity

Once you’ve established your programme and have seen some improvements, be on the lookout for flagging motivation and plan for adversity.

Daryl Sadgrove is a big fan of writing lists, keeping diaries, goal setting and other formal ways of keeping on track. He also says that one of the most common causes of people dropping off their fitness program is when something adverse happens – anything from an illness in the family to an injury or having to work unusually long hours.

“Exercise tends to be the first thing to go in these situations,” he says. “I suggest to my clients – and follow this myself – that they plan ahead.

Don’t just have one program; have several that are suited to likely events such as rain, illness, excess work, etc.”

For example, Daryl suggests that you might say, what if my knee goes bad again, or I have that six-week intensive project at work?

Introduction To Exercise

Your 'plan B' if your knee goes might be to ride your bike or go to aqua aerobics. That's step one. But more than that, you get your bike serviced and ready and buy a ten-pass to classes at the pool, so you are 100% prepared to slip into your 'plan B' at a moment's notice.

"Similarly with time management: if you can't go to the gym or do your walk at your usual time, come up with an alternative: work out an emergency routine you can do at home in front of the TV if it's raining or in a hotel room if you're travelling.

Don't give yourself an excuse not to exercise. Instead of the negative 'I can't do this', aim to reinforce all of your good work with positive, doable alternatives," says Daryl.

Chris, myHealthCoach