

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Today

“Communicating the Relevance of Research”

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This issue of *Physical Activity Today* focuses on the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, including specific information from the Guidelines for children, adults and older adults.

The long-awaited *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* were released in October 2008 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, marking the federal government’s first-ever comprehensive guidelines on physical activity (PA). Information and direction on the types and amounts of PA offering substantial health benefits are provided for various populations, including children and adolescents (ages 6–17), adults (ages 18–64), and older adults (ages 65 and older), individuals with disabilities, individuals with chronic conditions, and pregnant and post-partum women.

Impetus for Government Involvement

The Guidelines represent the first major scientific review of research delineating the benefits of PA in the last decade. Unfortunately, this recent review revealed many Americans are relatively inactive and little progress has been made in increasing the level of PA in the population. Engaging in PA is one of the most important steps that Americans of all ages can take to improve their health and reduce the risk of many health problems.

Innovative Recommendations

The evidence-based Guidelines are designed so people can easily fit PA into their daily plan and incorporate activities they enjoy. With the emphasis for adults on the total amount of activity per week, instead of a certain quantity each day, individuals are encouraged to design their own strategies to meet the Guidelines. These Guidelines also target subpopulations (e.g., older adults, pregnant–post-partum women, and persons with disabilities) that have been excluded from other guidelines. The most important message from the Guidelines is “Be active your way.”

Active Children and Adolescents

The 2008 *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* provides information and guidance on the types and amounts of PA recommended for children and adolescents (ages 6–17). Regular PA in children and adolescents supports good health and physical fitness. Additionally, active children are more likely to be active

and healthy adults. Compared with those who are not active, physically active youth have higher levels of aerobic fitness, stronger muscles, stronger bones, and lower body fatness. They may also have reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression. Unfortunately, as children grow into adolescents, they often become less physically active.

Key Recommendations

The Guidelines focus on activities for aerobic conditioning, muscle strengthening, and bone strengthening. Generally, children and adolescents should participate in one hour or more of PA every day. The majority of the hour or more each day should be either moderate- or vigorous-intensity aerobic PA. Including muscle-strengthening and bone-strengthening activities at least three days per week is also recommended.

Unlike the recommendations for adults, children and adolescents are offered no alternative on exercise frequency and should be active daily. Young people should be encouraged to participate in a variety of age-appropriate physical activities that they enjoy. This is especially important as children transition into adolescents, a period when PA often declines. Young people have unique movement patterns as they are often active in intermittent ways in their free play. The use of fundamental motor patterns such as skipping, jumping, and running, and lifting their body weight on playground equipment all contribute to the child’s total PA. Moderate to vigorous PA, even for brief periods, counts toward meeting the Guidelines.

Active Adults and Older Adults

Regular PA for adults and older adults is essential for healthy aging and reduces the likelihood of premature death and the development of many chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, some types of cancer, and depression. Regular PA also lowers the risk of obesity, stroke, metabolic syndrome, and loss of overall physical function. In essence, PA can be described as the best preventative medicine for all individuals.

PAT cont’d. on pg. 28

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Today

PAT cont'd. from pg. 27

“PA is the one ‘pill’ that can prolong life; reduce risks of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, and breast cancer; improve your blood pressure, glucose tolerance, and lipid profile; reduce risk of fracture from falls; and decrease depression. If you were to take pills to prevent all these diseases, you’d be taking a lot of them—with their attendant side effects.”

I-Min Lee, Assoc. Prof, Harvard Medical School. Health Letter, Harvard Medical School, 33(11), p. 8, September 2008

Key Recommendations

Active Adults (ages 18–64). The Guidelines suggest adults should engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity each week. Many types of aerobic activities (e.g., running, brisk walking, bicycling, basketball, active occupations, etc.) can count in the total weekly PA if they are of sufficient intensity and duration. Adults gain additional and more extensive health benefits with even more activity (300 minutes of moderate PA or 150 minutes of vigorous PA). Adults should also engage in muscle-strengthening exercises that are moderate/high intensity, involve major muscle groups, and load the skeletal system on two or more days per week, as these activities provide additional health benefits. Overall, any amount of PA is better than being sedentary.

Active Older Adults (ages 65 and older). The Guidelines for healthy adults over 65 years of age are the same for adults 18–64 years; however, most older adults have one or more chronic conditions, which vary in type and intensity, that will not allow them to meet the current Guidelines. In addition, all older adults have experienced a loss of physical fitness, some more than others. Thus, there are specific recommendations for older adults, which can provide additional guidance in selecting types and

amounts of physical activity appropriate for their abilities. They can also be used to guide adults younger than age 65 who have chronic conditions and those with a low level of fitness. They are as follows:

- Older adults who are limited in their ability to engage in PA should be as physically active as their abilities and conditions allow.
- Older adults should engage in exercises that maintain or improve balance if they are at risk of falling.
- Older adults should determine their level of effort for PA relative to their level of fitness.
- Older adults with chronic conditions should understand whether and how their conditions affect their ability to engage in regular PA safely.
- Older adults with chronic conditions should consult their health-care provider about the types and amounts of activity appropriate for them.

LEARN MORE:

The complete *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*, including a toolkit for promoting the Guidelines, can be accessed at the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans website: <http://www.health.gov/PAguidelines/>.

More information on the Physical Activity Guidelines Scientific Advisory Committee report, including recommendations for further research, can be accessed at: <http://www.health.gov/PAguidelines/Report/Default>.

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