

Ten Tips for Everyday Exercise

We all know regular exercise is a must for good health, and the benefits of a health club workout are well documented. The national Institute of Medicine wants all Americans to fit in at least 30 minutes to an hour of daily exercise into their routines, including swimming, brisk walking, and bicycling.

But if you already lead a busy life between home and the office, hopping back in the car to sit in traffic and pay someone to let you exercise can be a daunting prospect. There's a light at the end of that StairMaster session, though, so don't lose heart: If you put together enough short bouts of activity during the course of an ordinary day, you don't need to drag yourself to the gym.

To control your weight and enhance your well-being, make sure you move with vigor -- get a little sweat going -- for about 30 minutes a day. These 10 tips can help you work in a workout almost anytime and anyplace, either for free or dirt cheap, so the whole world is your health club.

1. Don't neglect that old standby, walking.

It's one of the best ways to exercise, and your only expense is a supportive pair of shoes. Walking is easy on your joints, it lifts your mood, and -- if you keep up a brisk pace -- your heart, lungs, and waistline will benefit. Walk to work if possible, or if you take public transportation, hop off a stop or two earlier than usual and hoof it from there. If you have a sit-down job, a brisk walk on one of your breaks can refresh body and mind for the rest of your workday.

2. Housework counts!

The motion of making a bed can burn around 230 calories an hour -- so just imagine what mopping the floor can do. Mind you, 30 seconds spent wiping off the kitchen counter isn't going to change your shape. Make sure you put some time and effort into these tasks. You get a twofold payoff: a fitter body and a neater home.

3. Climb stairs.

If the stairwell at your office is safe, shun the elevator and go for the original step workout. At home, look for reasons to make a trip upstairs. Shoot for charging up a couple of flights about four times a day. This activity can do double duty, giving you a cardiovascular workout while strengthening several muscle groups in your legs.

4. Find some hills near home or work, and power up them.

(Keep your knees healthy by taking it easy on the way down.) Just 30 minutes of walking will burn between 200 and 300 calories, depending on your size and the steepness of the incline.

5. Get out of the house, and go bowling!

The social interaction is good for your blood pressure, and the physical activity can burn about 260 calories per hour. Just go easy on the celebratory beer and pork rinds. (If you'd rather not hang out in a bowling alley, there are plenty of other convivial options: Go dancing or ice-skating, play Frisbee at the park, or take one of the kids in your life to the playground and climb the monkey bars together.)

6. Stretch out.

It feels great and may help prevent muscle strains. Here's a simple stretch you can do anywhere -- at your desk or standing in line at the supermarket -- to loosen your neck, shoulders, and chest: Take one arm at the wrist behind your back and pull gently, without turning your torso. Tilt your ear toward the pulling arm, and maintain the posture for at least 10 seconds, relaxing and breathing deeply. Switch arms, and repeat.

7. If you're the outdoorsy type, go for a bike ride.

As transportation or recreation, it's a good workout. Getting somewhere on your own power is satisfying and may even evoke that same carefree, self-sufficient feeling you had as a kid when you first pedaled around the block all by yourself. So get a bike basket and use your two-wheeler to do errands or get to work. If you're more indoorsy, consider a stationary bike. It offers the same health benefits as its mobile cousin, with a much lower risk of injury. Another plus is that you never run the risk of getting too tired to pedal back home. Don't forget to wear an ANSI-approved helmet!

8. Get in the garden, and weed, weed, weed.

You'll get stretching, strengthening, and possibly even aerobic benefits, depending on which kinds of yard work you do and how hard you push yourself. Raking leaves and cutting the lawn are excellent choices. With this workout, you also get fresh air and let go of a lot of stress, and your plants will thrive along with you.

9. Pick up a jump rope or a slideboard.

Either simple piece of equipment provides a fun aerobic workout. If you travel frequently, they're great choices, since they take up almost no room in your suitcase and you can use them in a hotel room. Jumping rope will have you sweating in no time, so work up to 10- or 15-minute stretches gradually. Try to dredge up a jump-rope chant from your childhood; it'll put you in a sunny mood. A slideboard, though no longer a trendy item in the fitness world, is a slick little roll-up mat you can purchase from several online sources and sporting goods stores; it comes with shoe covers that let you slide from side to side like a speed skater. Listening to music will help you keep a steady pace.

10. Be a pal.

Do you have a friend who's about to move? Is your neighbor planning to retiling her kitchen floor or painting her living room? Volunteer to help. Carrying boxes and furniture can be like a session in the weight room (just do some light stretching before and after, and be careful not to strain your back). Not only will you work large muscle groups, but you'll score points with your buddies -- and feel great about yourself.

Kate Lee

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