



Be Active, if Only for the Health of It!

by KATHY TAYLOR-ROGERS

So you want to be *active* because you know it will improve your health but you are going to start next week. Somehow next week becomes the week after and then next month. For some unknown reason everything else in life takes a priority over our personal health and well being. We see information all around us about the importance of physical activity and yet most of us have a lot of difficulty with starting or sticking to a plan to be more active. Some researchers report that physical inactivity is recognized as being second only to tobacco use as a key risk factor for ill health.

Let's explore the benefits of physical activity. Research has clearly demonstrated that regular physical activity can:

- greatly reduce the risk of Heart Disease and Stroke;
- decrease the risk of Peripheral Vascular Disease;
- decrease the risk of diabetes;
- reduce high blood pressure levels;
- assist in combating obesity;
- increase muscle strength and assist in prevention of back pain;
- lower the risk of osteoporosis;
- improve your lipid profile;
- half the risk of colon cancer; and
- improve your mood and reduce stress levels.

Some researchers even report that studies have shown a significant relationship between physical activity and improved cognitive functioning in older adults and decreased occurrence of dementia. One research study showed that those who exercised for at least 20-30 minutes, three times per week, were less likely to develop Alzheimer Disease.

Are you willing to keep putting the pursuit of a more active lifestyle off, when your very life may be at stake? I have never understood why people tend to think that "bad things" happen to "other" people but will not happen to them. Yet all around us we read and hear about 30, 40, 50 and 60 year olds who are facing quite serious health problems. Some are overcoming them by changing their lifestyles after their

diagnosis, but many others are not so lucky and do not get a warning call.

My advice is to stop procrastinating and make the decision to be more active now and stick to it. It does not have to mean spending a lot of money to join a gym that you have to get in the car and drive to. Much of the research has shown that 30 minutes per day of moderate intensity activity for five or more days per week can translate into significant health benefits. Each person needs to examine their own personal lifestyle habits and taking into consideration their own personality, decide on what will work best for them. When deciding on a plan some honest, personal reflection will be necessary. Registered dietician, Francine White, reports that two patterns emerge for unsuccessful physical activity plans. Unconscious resistance applies to someone who sets goals, starts a program and then sabotages it and quits. Active refusal applies to someone who experiences anxiety or resentment when exercise is recommended. For some people exercise may have become a punishment for excess weight or overeating so exercise brings about bad memories. For others just talking about the health benefits is enough to turn it from fun to "work" and who wants to do "work". Honest, personal reflection should provide you with the answers as to what has been stopping you from pursuing your goal for a more physically active life so that you can re-think your approach to physical activity.

The next step will be to figure out what will work best for you. There are endless options for how you can go about increasing your physical activity levels. You may join a dance class, take a brisk walk, wash the car by hand, join the gym, play catch or frisbee with the kids, do some gardening, join an aerobic class, buy an exercise or aerobic video and work out at home, bicycle, use the stairs, plan family swim nights, and the list goes on. The important task will be to examine your life and current routine and choose something that you can realistically fit in to your routine. It should also be something that you

will enjoy. In the beginning you may have to push yourself a little, but as this activity becomes more and more integrated into your lifestyle it will become easier and you will begin to look forward to it.

Once you make the decision to become more active it may be most helpful to define this goal and actually keep a journal of your progress. This may assist you in keeping on task and focused. It will also be a record of exactly what activities you are doing to keep active and how often you are doing them and the amount of time being spent on each activity. This will be a clear indicator of whether or not you are meeting your goal. Keep in mind that if a conscious effort towards developing and maintaining an active lifestyle is something new for you it will take awhile for you to incorporate this as a part of your everyday activities. It will probably take two months of this new routine for it to become an integrated part of your daily life. The good news is that once you make the conscious effort to embrace this new part of your lifestyle you will not have to think about it or work so hard at it. It will just become an automatic part of your everyday routine.

One thing to be aware of is that it is common to stray from your goal or plan. Life can get hectic and other commitments can get in the way now and then, but do not lose faith if this occurs. Sometimes people have a tendency to give up just because they run into a week where they are unable to keep their plans to be active. Do not despair; this is normal – just don't let it become your excuse for giving up – as this is the real trap. Just because your plan goes off track for a while is no reason to give up. Just get back on track at your first opportunity and rework your plan if you have too. The most important thing is to do what you can to keep on track as this is just as important, if not more important, than any of your other commitments – as you are doing this for you and you deserve to be good to yourself for a change!

Now that we've reviewed the benefits and explored possible options for how you can become more active, it is up to you to just do it. There is no time like the present and the benefits are well worth it.

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