

Member Pulse

Digest



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Fitness training: Elements of a well-rounded routine

Whether you're a novice taking the first steps toward fitness or an exercise fanatic hoping to optimize your results, a well-rounded fitness training program is essential. Include these five elements to create a balanced routine.

Aerobic fitness

Aerobic exercise, also known as cardio or endurance activity, is the cornerstone of most fitness training programs. Aerobic exercise causes you to breathe faster and more deeply, which maximizes the amount of oxygen in your blood. The better your aerobic fitness, the more efficiently your heart, lungs and blood vessels transport oxygen throughout your body — and the easier it is to complete routine physical tasks and rise to unexpected challenges, such as running to your car in the pouring rain.

Aerobic exercise includes any physical activity that uses large muscle groups and increases your heart rate. Try walking, jogging, biking, swimming, dancing, water aerobics — even leaf raking, snow shoveling and vacuuming. Aim for at least two hours and 30 minutes a week of moderate aerobic activity or one hour and 15 minutes a week of vigorous aerobic activity — preferably spread throughout the week.

Strength training

Muscular fitness is another key component of a fitness training program. Strength training at least twice a week can help you increase bone strength and muscular fitness. It can also help you maintain muscle mass during a weight-loss program.

Most fitness centers offer various resistance machines, free weights and other tools for strength training. But you don't need to invest in a gym membership or expensive equipment to reap the benefits of strength training. Hand-held weights or homemade weights — such as plastic soft drink bottles filled with water or sand — may work just as well. Resistance bands are another inexpensive option. Your own body weight counts, too. Try push-ups, abdominal crunches and leg squats.

Core exercises

The muscles in your abdomen, lower back and pelvis — known as your core muscles — help protect your back and connect upper and lower body movements. Core strength is a key element of a well-rounded fitness training program.

Core exercises help train your muscles to brace the spine and enable you to use your upper and lower body muscles more effectively. So what counts as a core exercise? Any exercise that uses the trunk of your body without support, including abdominal crunches. You can also try various core exercises with a fitness ball.

Balance training

Older adults in particular should include in their routine exercises to maintain or improve balance. This is important because balance tends to deteriorate with age, which can lead to falls and fractures. Try standing on one leg for increasing periods of time to improve your overall stability. Activities such as tai chi can promote balance, too.

Flexibility and stretching

Flexibility is an important part of physical fitness. Some types of physical activity, such as dancing, require more flexibility than others. Stretching exercises are effective in increasing flexibility, and thereby can allow people to more easily do activities that require greater flexibility. Stretching also improves the range of motion of your joints and promotes better posture. Regular stretching can even help relieve stress. For this reason, stretching and flexibility activities are an appropriate part of a physical activity program.

Before you stretch, warm up by walking or doing a favorite exercise at low intensity for five to 10 minutes. Better yet, stretch after you exercise — when your muscles are warm and receptive to stretching. Ideally, you'll stretch whenever you exercise. If you don't exercise regularly, you might want to stretch at least three times a week after warming up to maintain flexibility. Activities such as yoga promote flexibility, too.

Cover all the bases

Whether you create your own fitness training program or enlist the help of a personal trainer, aerobic fitness, strength training and core exercises, balance training, and stretching and flexibility should be part of your overall exercise plan. It isn't necessary to fit each of these elements into every fitness session, but factoring them into your regular routine can help you promote fitness for life.



Workplace exercises: How to burn calories at work

If you're doing your best to set aside time for physical activity either before work or after work, good for you — but finding time to exercise can be a challenge for anyone who has a busy schedule. Why not work out while you're at work? Consider 10 ways to make workplace exercises part of your routine.

No. 1: Make the most of your commute

Walk or bike to work. If you ride the bus or the subway, get off a few blocks early or at an earlier stop than usual and walk the rest of the way. If you drive to work, park at the far end of the parking lot — or park in the lot for a nearby building. In your building, take the stairs rather than the elevator.

No. 2: Look for opportunities to stand

You'll burn more calories standing than sitting. Stand while talking on the phone. Better yet, try a standing desk — or improvise with a high table or counter. Eat lunch standing up. Trade instant messaging and phone calls for walks to other desks or offices.

No. 3: Take fitness breaks

Rather than hanging out in the lounge with coffee or a snack, take a brisk walk or do some gentle stretching. For example, face straight ahead, then lower your chin to your chest. Or, while standing, grab one of your ankles — or your pant leg — and bring it up toward your buttock. Hold each stretch for 15 to 30 seconds.

No. 4: Trade your office chair for a fitness ball

Consider trading your desk chair for a firmly inflated fitness or stability ball, as long as you're able to safely balance on the ball. You'll improve your balance and tone your core muscles while sitting at your desk. You can even use the fitness ball for wall squats or other workplace exercises during the day.

No. 5: Keep fitness equipment in your work area

Store resistance bands — stretchy cords or tubes that offer weight-like resistance when you pull on them — or small hand weights in a desk drawer or cabinet. Do arm curls between meetings or tasks.

No. 6: Get social

Organize a lunchtime walking group. You might be surrounded by people who are ready to lace up their walking shoes — and hold each other accountable for regular exercise. Enjoy the camaraderie, and offer encouragement to one another when the going gets tough.

No. 7: Conduct meetings on the go

When it's practical, schedule walking meetings or walking brainstorming sessions. Do laps inside your building or, if the weather cooperates, take your walking meetings outdoors.

No. 8: Pick up the pace

If your job involves walking, do it faster. The more you walk and the quicker your pace, the greater the benefits.

No. 9: If you travel for work, plan ahead

If you're stuck in an airport waiting for a plane, grab your bags and take a brisk walk. Choose a hotel that has fitness facilities — such as treadmills, weight machines or a pool — or bring your equipment with you. Jump-ropes and resistance bands are easy to sneak into a suitcase. Of course, you can do jumping jacks, crunches and other simple exercises without any equipment at all.

No. 10: Try a treadmill desk

If you're ready to take workplace exercise to the next level, consider a more focused walk-and-work approach. If you can safely and comfortably position your work surface above a treadmill — with a computer screen on a stand, a keyboard on a table or a specialized treadmill-ready vertical desk — you might be able to walk while you work. In fact, Mayo Clinic researchers estimate that overweight office workers who replace sitting computer time with walking computer time by two to three hours a day could lose 44 to 66 pounds (20 to 30 kilograms) in a year. The pace doesn't need to be brisk, nor do you need to break a sweat. The faster you walk, however, the more calories you'll burn.

Want more ideas for workplace exercises? Schedule a walking meeting to brainstorm ideas with your supervisors or co-workers. Remember, any physical activity counts!



Fitness for less: Low-cost ways to shape up

If the only thing keeping you from starting a fitness program is the cost of a gym membership, here's good news. You don't need to join a gym to take physical activity seriously. Plenty of low-cost alternatives can help you get fit without breaking your budget. These tips can help you get started.

Take advantage of everyday opportunities

You don't need a gym or special equipment for an aerobic workout. With a little foresight, activities you may take for granted can become part of your fitness routine.

- **Step it up.** Take a brisk walk every day, whether it's in your neighborhood or a local mall. Take the stairs instead of the elevator or make a full workout of climbing the stairs. Sneak in extra steps whenever you can by parking farther away from your destination.
- **Make housework a workout.** Mow the lawn, weed the garden, rake the leaves or shovel the snow. Even indoor activities such as vacuuming and scrubbing count as a workout if you increase your heart rate.
- **Play with your kids.** If you have children, don't just watch them play. Join them for a game of tag or kickball. Walk them to the park. Dance. Take a family bike ride. Go to a community pool. Even if you don't swim, you can enjoy time in the water or walk in the shallow end. Do your kids play video games? If so, plug in with them and swing a virtual tennis racket or do a little boxing.

Improvise with household items

If you'd rather not spend a penny on exercise equipment, use ordinary household items for various upper and lower body exercises:

- **Canned goods.** Many canned goods can serve double duty as hand weights.
- **Chair or step stool.** Use a chair for support when doing exercises such as leg curls. A low, sturdy step stool can become exercise equipment if you use it for step training — an aerobic exercise resembling stair climbing.

Consider a modest investment

If you're able to spend a little, you can find inexpensive products to add variety to your fitness routine:

- **Dumbbells.** Use these small, hand-held weights to strengthen your upper body. They're available in many sizes.
- **Exercise DVDs and apps.** Create the feel of a health club aerobics class in your own living room — or choose a program that'll help you improve your strength and flexibility.

- **Fitness ball.** A fitness ball looks like a large beach ball. You can do many core exercises, including abdominal crunches, with a fitness ball. You can also use a fitness ball to improve your flexibility and balance.
- **Jump-ropes.** Skipping rope can be a great cardiovascular workout.
- **Resistance tubing.** These stretchy tubes offer weight-like resistance when you pull on them. Use the tubes to build strength in your arms and other muscles. Choose from varying degrees of resistance, depending on your fitness level.

Be a savvy shopper

If you're interested in a specific exercise class or piece of equipment, shop around to find the best deal.

- **Check out your local recreation department.** Many recreation departments offer discounted fitness classes to local residents. If you live near a high school or college with a fitness center, ask if the facility is available to community members.
- **Buy used equipment.** Some sporting goods stores specialize in used equipment — or you can check out listings for exercise equipment in the local newspaper. You may also find great deals on used exercise equipment online. Just make sure the cost of shipping won't put the item out of your budget.
- **Share costs with a friend.** Trade exercise videos or DVDs with a friend so that neither of you gets bored doing the same workout over and over again. Find a personal trainer who'll let you share the cost of a session with a friend or two.

Remember, getting in shape doesn't need to be expensive. Don't get caught up in memberships or purchases you can't afford. Instead, concentrate on your fitness goals — and how to achieve them without breaking your budget.



Exercise and stress: Get moving to manage stress

You know that exercise does your body good, but you're too busy and stressed to fit it into your routine. Hold on a second — there's good news when it comes to exercise and stress.

Virtually any form of exercise, from aerobics to yoga, can act as a stress reliever. If you're not an athlete or even if you're downright out of shape, you can still make a little exercise go a long way toward stress management. Discover the connection between exercise and stress relief — and why exercise should be part of your stress management plan.

Exercise and stress relief

Exercise increases your overall health and your sense of well-being, which puts more pep in your step every day. But exercise also has some direct stress-busting benefits.

- **It pumps up your endorphins.** Physical activity helps to bump up the production of your brain's feel-good neurotransmitters, called endorphins. Although this function is often referred to as a runner's high, a rousing game of tennis or a nature hike also can contribute to this same feeling.
- **It's meditation in motion.** After a fast-paced game of racquetball or several laps in the pool, you'll often find that you've forgotten the day's irritations and concentrated only on your body's movements. As you begin to regularly shed your daily tensions through movement and physical activity, you may find that this focus on a single task, and the resulting energy and optimism, can help you remain calm and clear in everything that you do.
- **It improves your mood.** Regular exercise can increase self-confidence and lower the symptoms associated with mild depression and anxiety. Exercise also can improve your sleep, which is often disrupted by stress, depression and anxiety. All this can ease your stress levels and give you a sense of command over your body and your life.

Put exercise and stress relief to work for you

A successful exercise program begins with a few simple steps.

- **Consult with your doctor.** If you haven't exercised for some time and you have health concerns, you may want to talk to your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.
- **Walk before you run.** Build up your fitness level gradually. Excitement about a new program can lead to overdoing it and possibly even injury. For most healthy adults, the Department of Health and Human Services recommends getting at least 150 minutes a week of moderate aerobic activity (think brisk walking or swimming) or 75 minutes a week of vigorous aerobic activity (such as running). If you're new to exercise, start at the moderate level and then add vigorous activity as your fitness improves.

- **Do what you love.** Virtually any form of exercise or movement can increase your fitness level while decreasing your stress. The most important thing is to pick an activity that you enjoy. Examples include walking, stair climbing, jogging, bicycling, yoga, tai chi, gardening, weightlifting and swimming.
- **Pencil it in.** Although your schedule may necessitate a morning workout one day and an evening activity the next, carving out some time to move every day helps you make your exercise program an ongoing priority.

Stick with it

Starting an exercise program is just the first step. Here are some tips for sticking with a new routine or reinvigorating a tired workout:

- **Set SMART goals.** Write down specific, measureable, attainable, relevant and time-limited goals. If your primary goal is to reduce stress in your life and recharge your batteries, your specific goals might include committing to walking during your lunch hour three times a week or, if needed, finding a baby sitter to watch your children so that you can slip away to attend a cycling class.
- **Find a friend.** Knowing that someone is waiting for you to show up at the gym or the park can be a powerful incentive. Working out with a friend, co-worker or family member often brings a new level of motivation and commitment to your workouts.
- **Change up your routine.** If you've always been a competitive runner, take a look at other less competitive options that may help with stress reduction, such as Pilates or yoga classes. As an added bonus, these kinder, gentler workouts may enhance your running while also decreasing your stress.
- **Exercise in increments.** Even brief bouts of activity offer benefits. For instance, if you can't fit in one 30-minute walk, try three 10-minute walks instead. What's most important is making regular physical activity part of your lifestyle.

Whatever you do, don't think of exercise as just one more thing on your to-do list. Find an activity you enjoy — whether it's an active tennis match or a meditative meander down to a local park and back — and make it part of your regular routine. Any form of physical activity can help you unwind and become an important part of your approach to easing stress.

Getting Started is Easy!
Call your EAP for more information