

How much exercise is necessary?

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How much should one exercise? That is a common question I hear from students and clients. On a practical level, you should exercise as much as you're willing to do. Is it ideal to exercise one or two times a week? No it is not, but it's still much better than not exercising. The most important point here is that you find a physical activity that you enjoy and that ensures you will actually do it daily.

Now before I get into specifics I need to define what exercise is and how to structure a program. Exercise can be put into two categories--cardiovascular and strength training. Both are essential yet vastly different in terms of how to train for each of them. Cardiovascular training is steady movement that is of a long duration with a moderate workload. Examples of this include walking, cycling, running, and swimming. Those activities should be performed for a minimum of 20 minutes of steady movement. If you have not been exercising consistently, then start at a number that feels correct for your current level of conditioning. That might be 5 minutes or even 15 minutes. Strength training is of short duration at a high workload, with rest periods of at least one minute before beginning the next set or round. Examples of strength training include weight lifting, body weight movements like push ups, pull ups, squats without weights, and including power or ballistic training like jumping, sprinting or leaping.

I realize ballistic movements are not realistic for older adults with arthritic or painful joints. Yet lifting dumbbells or using Therabands for resistance can improve strength. Body weight movements can be modified--instead of performing push-ups on the floor, one can lean against a wall and perform them with a much lighter workload. If someone has trouble with body weight squats, they can always try squatting into a chair to provide a sense of security.

Now that we know the different types of exercise, how many times per week is ideal? Walking is a very healthy, low impact form of exercise that can be performed daily. Walking or any other cardiovascular activity, 4 or 5 days per week, is optimal. Strength training ideally is performed 3 or 4 times per week. It does not have to take long--15 to 20 minutes of strength training will help maintain muscle mass with age. That alone will pay huge dividends in the long run. However, if you're strength training twice per week and walking 3 times per week, you are meeting fitness goals that the majority of Americans are not. Start off with something realistic and, most important of all, find activities that you enjoy and that allow you to develop a passion for! In the long run, you will be much better off!