



## Exercise Benefits Women Especially Female Baby Boomers

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The most recent version of *The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (2005)* stresses the importance of exercise for our physical and mental health. *The Guidelines* state that we need at least 30 minutes of moderate activity per day on most days of the week. We can increase the benefits of exercise with slightly longer or more intense workouts. Female Baby Boomers can get the greatest health benefits, and help fend off the gradual weight gain that often occurs during midlife, by striving for 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity on most days of the week.

When we think about the benefits of exercise, we often focus on how it helps us lose or maintain our weight. But, exercise gives us so much more. Exercise strengthens our bones, tones our muscles, burns fat, improves our cardiovascular system, helps prevent depression and fatigue, and lowers our risk of some diseases. Let's look at a few particulars:

- Studies have shown that regular physical activity, such as walking briskly for at least 3 hours a week or exercising vigorously for at least 90 minutes a week, can reduce our risk of developing heart disease by as much as 50% when compared to sedentary women. Active women also tend to have higher levels of HDL, the "good" cholesterol.
- Regular physical activity has been linked to a reduced risk of breast cancer and a cut in our risk of colon cancer by half. It has also been shown to provide moderate protection against type 2 diabetes.
- Exercise produces a mechanical stress that forces our bones to absorb more calcium and become stronger. A large study of women over age 65 showed a 30% reduction in the risk of hip fractures in those who walked for exercise compared with those who didn't.
- Studies have shown that exercise is good for our mental as well as our physical health. In some cases, physical activity can be as effective as psychotherapy, relaxation, and meditation in helping women cope with stress and depression. Exercise also improves our sleep, which can have a beneficial impact on our mood. Women who exercise in health clubs or

with walking groups often experience an improved sense of well-being from the social interactions that these groups provide.

A good exercise program has four key components: aerobic activity, strength training, flexibility work, and balance exercises. Each component benefits our body in a different way. Aerobic activity improves our heart health, lowers our risk of chronic diseases, and can lengthen our lifespan. Strength training (also referred to as resistance exercise) strengthens our muscles and bones, and improves our ratio of lean muscle mass to fat. Muscle tissue burns more calories than fat tissue and gives us a tight/toned physique. Flexibility training keeps our joints lubricated, and our muscles stretched and limber. Recent research showing the importance of mind-body exercises for maintaining cognitive health and mental acuity has prompted the addition of balance training to our key components of fitness. Balance exercises help maintain precision in our neural muscular connections. Of particular importance for the Baby Boom Generation is that balance training helps maintain coordination and prevent falls.

If it has been a while since we last exercised regularly, it's a good idea to develop a plan. We should plan when we'll exercise and what we'll do. Our plan needs to be realistic to give us the best possible chance of sticking with it; and since we're in this long-term, it should include the present and future. We have to accept that we'll give up something to exercise. We may give up some sleep in the morning or some free time later in the day. But, if we start slowly, and are persistent and patient, we will see the results of our efforts.

For maximum benefits, we should exercise on a regular basis, at least 2 or 3 times a week to start, and work our way up to more sustained activity. We should choose activities that we enjoy, so we'll want to exercise. But, we must include all four key components of fitness in our exercise plan, as well as a warm up and cool down before and after exercising to reduce our risk of injury. The time we spend exercising will be well worth it in so many ways!

Reference: Everydayhealth.com 2008