

# Make Small Changes, Get Big Results

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In a country overwhelmed with confusing fitness advice, it's no wonder more of us don't embrace an active lifestyle. Complicated exercise programs that require intense effort can discourage even the most committed exerciser. Despite its best efforts, the fitness industry has made little progress in its campaign to get America moving.

If you're like most people, you may be disappointed with the fact that you don't exercise more consistently. Your good intentions seem to be swept away by some mysterious force. Too many people have accepted the notion that staying fit is impossible or at least not worth the effort! As a result they live lives plagued by diseases that could easily be prevented. Today more Americans are choosing drug therapy over physical activity as a way to manage their health.

Despite these discouraging realities, there is hope. Becoming physically fit should not be a painful, uphill battle. There are easy-to-use strategies that will make a real difference in your life. It's time to accept the truth that small changes can produce big results.

## **A Lazy Environment**

Many Americans mistakenly believe that they are just plain lazy. When asked about exercise, they acknowledge their inactive lifestyles with a degree of shame. Contrary to what most Americans believe, laziness has little to do with our sedentary ways.

America's tendency towards inactivity has much more to do with the environment. It may sound crazy, but we live in a paradise of energy conservation. Many of the day-to-day, calorie-burning activities that were once commonplace (cutting the grass, opening the garage door, etc.) no longer exist. Opportunities to burn calories have been systematically engineered out of our lives.

In our modern culture, physical activity has become completely unnecessary. For dinner we push a button on the microwave, ingest 3000 calories and throw away the disposable container, or we hit the drive-through on the way home for some equally high-calorie, dashboard dining. These behaviors are not biologically driven. They are supported by an environment engineered to be efficient.

Since the beginning of time, our lifestyles have always been influenced by the environments we live in. It's only reasonable to expect that an environment filled with energy-conserving devices (modern-day conveniences) would lead to an inactive lifestyle.

## A “Good News” Approach

In an effort to offset our environment, fitness professionals have worked hard to motivate Americans into action. Unfortunately, they’ve made a few mistakes along the way. One of those mistakes is the use of a “bad news” approach. A “bad news” approach focuses its message on the harmful effects of being inactive. This type of approach typically leaves people feeling worse about the fact that they are already doing nothing. It basically says, “you may develop a serious health problem if you don’t change your ways”. It doesn’t take a behavioral scientist to figure out that a “bad news” approach doesn’t motivate most people to change.

However, a “good news” approach does motivate people to change. A “good news” approach shows how small changes can produce significant benefits. A “good news” approach provides hope for a better future. By providing specific “good news” examples, people become encouraged and begin to take their health into their own hands. Some examples include:

### **Fat Loss**

When you look at physical activity from a fat-loss perspective, it’s all good news. A brisk, 10-minute walk each day will burn approximately 75 calories for the average person. In one year that’s over 27,000 calories or roughly eight pounds of body fat. Within ten short years, that’s a whopping 80 pounds of body fat. This kind of calorie-burning analysis adds meaning to that daily walk. Over time, your return on investment (7.5 calories burned for every minute walked) is spectacular. These numbers beat the best stocks Wall Street has to offer.

### **Brain Power**

Your entire body (especially your brain) loves physical activity. An analysis of 78 studies published in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* concluded that an inactive lifestyle produces unusual stress on brain chemistry. Small amounts of activity can actually offset this stress. A study published in the journal, *Health Psychology*, found that 10 minutes of moderate-intensity, physical activity (brisk walking) was sufficient to improve mood and reduce fatigue.

Recently Johns Hopkins School of Medicine reported in its *White Papers* that “Taking regular walks is not just one of the best ways to keep your body healthy, but research now suggests that it keeps your mind healthy as well.” It’s becoming

clear that even small amounts of physical activity can stimulate your brain to work better.

### **Better Behaviors**

It's amazing, but true. Physical activity gets you to behave better. If you were to ask any of my clients, they would tell you that physical activity is *the glue* that holds other healthy behaviors in place. Making the decision to be active somehow encourages people to engage in other health habits. I like to think that one good decision leads to another. A landmark study published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* demonstrated a link between physical activity and other healthy habits (such as improved eating).

The scientists in this study coined the term “gateway behavior.” They concluded that physical activity acts as a “gateway behavior” leading to other productive health habits such as improved eating. This study reinforces the fact that physical activity gets people to behave better overall.

### **Heart Healthy**

When it comes to heart disease, a walk a day could literally save your life. Brisk walking has been shown to protect against heart disease by increasing HDL (good cholesterol) and maintaining healthy blood vessels. A 2001 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* tracked 40,000 women for five years and found that those who walked at least an hour a week (less than 10 minutes per day) were half as likely to be diagnosed with heart disease compared to those who didn't walk. Walking has also been linked to lower blood pressure which reduces the risk of heart disease.

### **Muscular Fitness**

Maintaining muscular fitness is much more doable than people realize. When done properly, strength training should be brief and infrequent. According to the American College of Sports Medicine, two, full-body workouts per week can produce significant health benefits. What most people don't realize is that one workout per week can delay the onset of sarcopenia (the age-related loss of muscle, bone and strength). In other words, one workout per week can keep you strong and functional as you age.

### **Making Small Changes**

By now it should be clear that you don't have to run marathons to achieve meaningful health benefits. Several years ago I decided to take advantage of this truth by adding small amounts of activity to my existing program. I found several opportunities (walking and stair climbing) that already existed within my daily routine. This approach works well because it doesn't require any additional time on my part.

Most of my extra walking occurs by parking in the far corner of the parking lot. This strategy also eliminates the stress and anxiety of fighting for the best parking spot (an additional health benefit). A typical week also provides me with many opportunities to climb stairs. On those extra-busy weeks, I still take time (less than 30 minutes) to squeeze in at least one strength workout.

After years of living this way, these behaviors have become woven into the fabric of my life. I don't think about them, I just do them. By the end of the week, I will have burned an additional 250 calories and completed one strength workout – no matter how busy I am. In one year that's almost 18,000 calories and 52 strength workouts – enough to make a real difference with my health.

### **That First Step**

Given that physical activity benefits your entire body (from head to toe), you have a lot to gain by taking that first step. Begin by making a few small changes and taking advantage of the fact that small changes produce big results.