

What is cardiovascular exercise and why do I need it?

In previous weeks, we talked about exercise vs. physical activity. This week, we want to provide more information about cardiovascular (aerobic) exercise, aka “cardio”. Cardiovascular fitness refers to the ability of your heart, lungs and organs to consume, transport and utilize oxygen. When you exercise regularly, you can increase your cardiovascular fitness as your heart becomes more efficient at pumping blood and oxygen to the body, and the body becomes more efficient at using that oxygen. Cardio exercise is any continuous activity that gets your heart working and can be sustained for 15 minutes or longer and it’s recommended every day for optimal benefit.

Some of the benefits to performing cardiovascular exercise include:

- Lower blood pressure
- Increased HDL cholesterol
- Decreases total cholesterol
- Decreases body fat due to utilizing fat as energy
- Increases heart function and its ability to pump more blood
- Decreases stress reactions and anxiety
- Reduce glucose-stimulated insulin
- Increased oxygen output to body
- Decreases resting heart rate
- Increases cardiac output
- Increased aerobic work capacity

Types of cardiovascular exercise include: running, walking, jogging, bicycling, jump-roping, swimming, using treadmills, stationary bicycles, stairclimbers, rowing machines and elliptical trainers – there are others. Some of these exercises are done “weight bearing” and some are not.

Cardio exercise puts positive stress on the heart, however the level of stress placed on your heart must be appropriate for your level of fitness. A great way to test how your body is doing is to take the “talk test”. If, during your workout or activity, you are able to carry on a conversation—even if it is a little breathy—then you are working aerobically. If you find that you cannot talk, you are working too hard and will want to reduce your intensity. Of course, if you have any questions or concerns, consult your health care professional.

Be sure to choose a level of intensity that feels good to you and your body. You do want to be challenged, as it is through meeting this challenge that change happens. However, you never want to push yourself to the point of fatigue or pain. Use your breath as your coach. If it is extremely comfortable, we encourage you to push a little harder. On the other hand, if it becomes extremely short and shallow, pull back a little. As you get stronger you will need to increase the intensity to keep challenging yourself but only if your body is ready for it.

Finally, because cardio training typically includes activities that require movement in your joints, assess how your knees, ankles and lower back feel. As the intensity

increases so does the impact on the joints. Be sure to always land with soft knees and never “lock out” or over extend your joints.

This week’s action step: If you are already doing cardio exercise, monitor your breathing and “check in” with yourself – How do you feel? Can you safely challenge yourself more? Is there another type of exercise you may want to try to obtain more of a benefit? If you’re not doing cardio, then look for ways you can introduce it into your daily routine – walking, riding a bike or swimming are great ways to begin. Cardio exercise is essential for health and wellness – the quality of your everyday life will be improved!

We can help you reach your goals with Creating Wellness! Do you know how well you are? The absence of illness or discomfort does not necessarily mean we are healthy and well. A Creating Wellness assessment can help identify the areas of your life that, if improved, will allow you to live life with vitality and energy! Ask us about how you can create more wellness in your life!

Portions of this week’s wellness tip were provided by Petra Kolber of the Creating Wellness team.

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