

# Exercise and physical activity

## Every minute counts!

### A look into the recommended amount of physical activity

By Kevin Repato and Margie McNeely

#### Introduction

Research evidence shows that physical activity provides many benefits—this includes better functioning of your heart and lungs, muscle strength, brain health, and ability to perform tasks of daily living<sup>1</sup>. Given the recent update to the *Canada Food Guide*, we thought it was a good time to revisit the physical activity guidelines.



The purpose of this article is to provide you with an update on the current thinking around physical activity and exercise. Please remember that if you do not currently exercise regularly, you should consult your doctor or healthcare professional before starting any new exercise program beyond simply walking.

#### What is the difference between physical activity and exercise?

Physical activity is any movement beyond resting<sup>1</sup>. Exercise is a form of leisure-time physical activity that is planned, structured, and repeated to specifically improve one or more aspects of physical fitness. It is recommended that if you are an adult 18 years or older, you should do at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, and bone and muscle

strengthening exercises at least 2 days per week<sup>2,4</sup>. It is also important to add stretching activities into your overall fitness program to help you develop and maintain your range of motion. If you are 65 years or older and have poor mobility, you may also need to add in balance exercises to help prevent falls<sup>4</sup>.

#### Managing your lymphedema

The combination of regular physical activity and structured exercise can also help you feel, function, and sleep better<sup>1</sup>. In the instance of lymphedema, exercise is part of the regimen to help you manage your swelling<sup>5</sup>. The following exercise guidelines are not intended for your lymphedema specifically, but as a general reference to the type and amount of exercise you may want to do for disease prevention and to improve your general health.

#### What's new?

In the past, we were told that exercise needed to be in sessions or “bouts” of at least 10 minutes. The thinking was that exercise needed to be carried out continuously for at least this amount of time to be beneficial to your fitness or health. The new thinking is that, when it comes to physical activity, “everything counts”, even short bursts of exercise<sup>6</sup>. The message now is to seek out any and all opportunities to move during the day, and add in short bursts of higher intensity activity. For example, you could walk more briskly to a meeting or take the stairs to add short bursts of exercise into your day<sup>6</sup>.

#### Move more... by stepping into action

In keeping with the new thinking, counting steps is another way to increase overall activity. In a recent worldwide survey of fitness trends for 2019, wearable technology was #1<sup>7</sup>. This includes fitness trackers, smart watches, heart rate monitors, and GPS trackers. Examples include activity trackers that can track heart rate, sitting time, sleep patterns, and much more<sup>7</sup>. A pedometer is a less expensive, simpler option to wearable technology. It is a device that counts the number of steps you take during the day based on the swinging motion of your leg. It is about the size of a business card and is typically worn on the waistband of your clothing or on a belt<sup>8</sup>.



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The number of steps recommended for good health is a goal of 7000 to 8000 steps per day<sup>9</sup>. Many Canadians only take around 2000 to 4000 steps per day. The good news is that any increase in the number of steps you take is good for you. If you can increase your daily step count by 2,500 steps you will see even more health benefits. Our suggestion is to increase the number of steps by about 5% per week until you reach your new goal. We provide an example below on how you can slowly increase your step count. To get more steps, try parking farther away at the grocery store, taking the stairs rather than the elevator, marching on the spot, dancing to a favourite song, or taking a short walk break at work.

Your average number of steps taken per day  
Step count goal: 5500

3,000

- Goal week 1: 3150 steps per day
- Goal week 2: 3300 steps per day
- Goal week 3: 3450 steps per day
- Goal week 4: 3600 steps per day
- Goal week 17: 5500 steps per day

### Formal daily exercise for fitness

According to the World Health Organization, if you meet or exceed 150 minutes per week of physical activity, you will live longer, are less likely to suffer a stroke or to develop heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, depression, and breast cancer<sup>6</sup>. You are also more likely to maintain a healthy body weight. If you do more than 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity a week, you will see even more health benefits.

### Warm-up

A typical exercise session needs to start with a warm-up prior to the exercise session.

When you have a chronic condition it is even more important to ensure you do a proper warm up. The warm-up involves performing exercise/activity at a slower speed or lighter intensity (e.g., marching on the spot) to allow the body to slowly get warm and for the heart and muscles to adapt.

### Aerobic “Live longer” exercise

Aerobic type exercises are known to help us live a longer and healthier life. This type of exercise involves the large muscles in your arms and legs, is rhythmic, and sustained for a set period of time. The objective of this form of activity is to make your heart beat faster and for you to breathe harder than normal. In this way, you will help your heart and lungs work better<sup>6</sup>.

A common question we hear is “what counts as moderate intensity activity?” While jogging, rowing, biking, and swimming are usually what we think of as exercise; there are other activities that may not feel like exercise but can help you reach the recommended guidelines—for example, raking the leaves, home repair work, or even walking the dog. If you are having trouble determining the intensity of moderate activity, you can use the “talk test” to find out. If you’re breathing hard but can still carry on a conversation, it’s moderate-intensity activity<sup>10</sup>. If you can only say a few words at a time before having to take another breath, the exercise is likely vigorous-intensity. The activity chart (see below), based on the Compendium of Physical Activities, provide examples of activities of different intensities<sup>11,12</sup>.

### Muscle and bone strengthening exercises...“Live better” exercise

Muscle-strengthening activities use the body’s muscles to work against an applied force or weight. This often involves lifting somewhat heavy objects several times to strengthen a muscle or muscle group. We call this type of training “live better” exercise. Improving your muscle strength is beneficial to help you carry out everyday activities, such as climbing stairs, lifting heavy objects, or playing with the kids<sup>6</sup>. If you are stronger you will be able to do these activities more easily.

The key guideline for muscle-strengthening activities is to perform movements of moderate or greater intensity that involve all major muscle groups. The major muscle groups of the body include the legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms. For each activity, 8 to 12 repetitions for one set are effective, although 2 or more sets may be even better. Gradually increasing the amount of weight you lift or move will help to keep challenging your muscles, and increase your strength<sup>6</sup>.

At the gym, this type of exercise can be done using weight machines, barbells, dumbbells, kettle bells, sandbags, medicine balls and so much more<sup>10</sup>. When it comes to what exercises you could be doing, there are resources online and personal trainers who can help you get started. Many day-to-day activities also challenge your muscles—for example, heavy gardening, carrying heavy groceries, or shovelling snow.

When performing muscle-strengthening activities, you want the activity to be challenging and tolerable, but not painful. You should

	Low-Intensity Activities	Moderate-Intensity Activities	Vigorous-Intensity Activities
Activities of Daily Living	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watering plants</li> <li>• Shopping</li> <li>• Cooking/ preparing food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sweeping the floors</li> <li>• Painting the fence</li> <li>• Walking slowly and carrying objects less than 10 kg</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mowing the lawn with non-powered mower</li> <li>• Shoveling snow</li> <li>• Moving furniture, household items, carrying boxes</li> </ul>
Leisure Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Darts, billiards</li> <li>• Stretching</li> <li>• Walking slowly (3+ km/hr)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Golf, curling</li> <li>• Water aerobics</li> <li>• Walking at a brisk pace (6 km/hr)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hockey, basketball, swimming</li> <li>• Stationary rowing</li> <li>• Walking uphill (5-6 km/hr)</li> </ul>

feel comfortably tired when you finish. The next day, you may notice that your muscles are a bit sore or stiff, but this soreness should resolve within 48 hours. If you are very sore or the soreness does not resolve, your body is telling you that you need lighter resistance or less weight.

### Stretching “Move better” exercises

There are countless activities of daily living that require us to bend, twist and reach. Stretching exercises help us to move better and more smoothly. Stretching exercises are effective in increasing your flexibility, so you can bend to put on your socks or reach for objects on the top shelf without causing pain or injury<sup>6</sup>.

Stretching exercises should be done for the major muscle groups a minimum of 2-3 days per week. Hold each stretch, at the point of tightness, for 10 to 30 seconds<sup>10</sup>. If you are an older adult, stretching for 30 to 60 seconds may result in greater gains in flexibility. You should repeat each stretch 2-4 times to accumulate a total of 60 seconds, such as 2 sets of 30-second holds.



### Cool it down

A cool-down phase is really important to bring down your heart rate and to slow your breathing. Like the warm-up, perform 5 to 10 minutes of light-to-moderate intensity activity such as slow walking<sup>10</sup>. You should finish off your session with your stretching exercises.

### Summary

- Perform a warm-up and cool-down with at least 5-10 minutes of light-to-moderate intensity activity or use of lighter weights.
- Aim to accumulate at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity activity.
- Do muscle-strengthening activities of moderate or greater intensity involving all major

muscle groups 2 or more days a week.

- Stretch all major muscle groups to the point of tightness for 10-30 seconds. You should stretch at least 2-3 days per week.

### Guidance from professionals

If you do not normally exercise but want to get started, then we recommend that you start by discussing your plan with your healthcare provider. Certified fitness professionals, such as personal trainers or exercise specialists, can help provide you with advice on activities that best match your abilities and interests. They can also ensure you are exercising properly.

It is really important that you choose activities that you enjoy, and that feel good when doing them. If you dread, or if you feel terrible when exercising, you are less likely to stick with it. Simply finding ways to move more in your day may be a better strategy for you.

Remember, everything counts, so seek out any and all opportunities to move. [LP](#)

A full set of references can be found at [www.lymphedemapathways.ca](http://www.lymphedemapathways.ca)



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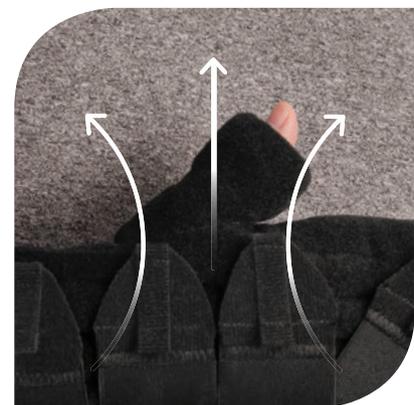
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