

Exercise is important for everyone, even kids as young as 3



Elementary schoolchildren run under a rainbow-colored tarp during the 15th Annual Kansas Kids Fitness Day in Hutchinson, Kansas. Photo by: Aaron Marineau/AP Photos

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CHICAGO, Illinois--New government guidelines want kids to move more, sit less and get active as young as age 3. The guidelines stress that all exercise, any amount and any type, helps health.

The advice is the first update since the government's physical activity guidelines came out 10 years ago. Since then, the list of benefits of exercise has grown. There's more evidence to suggest things that were of unknown value before, this means short, high-intensity workouts and taking the stairs instead of an elevator are good for you.

“Doing something is better than doing nothing, and doing more is better than doing something,” said Dr. Donald Lloyd-Jones, a preventive medicine expert at Northwestern University in Chicago.

Only 20 percent of Americans get enough exercise now. The childhood obesity problem has pushed doctors to aim younger to prevent poor health later in life.

Some of the highlights of the advice were released Monday, November 12 at an American Heart Association conference. The advice was also published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Three Hours A Day Of Activity Is Recommended

The biggest change: start young. Guidelines for activity used to begin at age 6. The new ones say preschoolers ages 3 through 5 should be encouraged to take part in active play throughout the day. The guidelines don't call for a certain amount but say a good target may be three hours of various levels. That's similar to guidelines in many other countries and is the usual amount of activity kids this age do.

From ages 6 through 17, at least one hour of moderate-to-vigorous activity throughout the day is recommended. Most of it should be aerobic, the kind that gets the heart rate up such as brisk walking, biking or running. At least three times a week, exercise should be vigorous and include muscle- and bone-strengthening activities like climbing on playground equipment or playing sports.

For adults, the recommended time for exercise stays the same. Adults need at least 2½ to 5 hours of moderate-intensity or 1¼ to 2½ hours of vigorous activity a week. At least two days a week, adults should include muscle-strengthening exercise like push-ups or lifting weights.

There is one key change, though. It used to be thought that aerobic activity had to be done for at least 10 minutes. Now even short times are known to help. Even a single, short time of activity gives short-term benefits such as lowering blood pressure, reducing anxiety and improving sleep.

Sitting too much is especially harmful.

Kids Can Be Taught The Importance Of Exercise

The advice is similar for older adults. Older adults should also do things that promote balance, such as leg raises, to help avoid falls.

Dr. Valentin Fuster, a cardiologist at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, has been working on a goal to get young children to exercise. Fuster's project has worked for years with the Heart Association and Sesame Workshop, producers of television's "Sesame Street."

At the conference, Fuster gave results of a four-month program to improve knowledge and attitudes about exercise and health. The program worked with 562 kids ages 3 to 5 in Head Start preschools in Harlem, New York.

"It was really successful," Fuster said. "Once they understand how the body works, they begin to understand physical activity" and its importance.

When brains are young, "It's the best opportunity" to set health habits that last, he said.