

[IMAGE]

In Shape for Life

A Practical Formula for Long-Term Success

By Meghan Vivo

Fad diets come and go - low-carb, low-fat, all-natural. Throw in the extremes, like liquid diets, the grapefruit diet, fat-flush plans and starvation diets, and most Americans give up on healthy eating altogether, at least over the long term. And what excuse do you have for avoiding exercise?

Every study, scientific report and expert commentary on good health endorses moderate-to-strenuous exercise. It doesn't matter whether you walk, run, skip, hop or even just clean the house, as long as you are moving. Any more excuses? Too tired? Too busy? Not enough energy? It's time to banish the excuses and embrace lifelong fitness.

In addition to the obvious benefits of weight control, keeping bones and muscles strong, and reducing your risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes and other afflictions, exercise also will help you get a good night's sleep and reduce feelings of depression and overall negativity. Exercise releases endorphins and activates neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and norepinephrine, which are associated with depression. It's also a great way to relieve stress and unwind.

Girl standing in front of blackboard with arms folded. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark For those of a practical mindset, healthy eating also can put more change in your pocket. Think about it. How many times a week do you eat out or make a last-minute stop for burgers and fries? Do you buy or make your lunches? By cutting back on eating out, you can lose weight, be proud of doing something good for yourself and save money at the same time!

Is a lack of motivation getting you down? Here are a few pointers for kick-starting an exercise regimen that can get and keep you in shape for life.

Set Realistic Goals

Fire up your health plan by assessing your current physical condition and setting both short-term and long-term goals. Your goals should not include all-or-nothing statements like, "I'm going to exercise every day, no matter what" or "I'll never eat chocolate again." Terms such as *never* or *always* set you up for intense feelings of guilt in moments of weakness. Guilt almost inevitably feeds the desire to binge and accept defeat - again.

Rather than beating yourself up if you miss a workout or overindulge in your favorite food, quickly get back into your routine. You're only human, after all.

When setting exercise goals, start with baby steps. Engage in some type of physical activity two to three times a week for at least 30 minutes at a time, and increase the intensity as you get stronger. When you establish a routine, choose exercises and a workout schedule you can stick with. If you are busy with work or kids in the evening, exercise in the morning. If you despise the gym, jog outside or join a sports team. You can stay motivated by writing down your plan and creating a list of rewards you'll earn when you achieve your goals - a new outfit, a trip to Bermuda; whatever drives you. When your hard work pays off, take pride in your achievements, however small, whether it's increasing the weight you can lift, to building up your speed on the treadmill, or actually making it to the gym three days a week. You also may find it helpful to identify a healthy role model - a friend, family member or co-worker - who can provide a model diet and exercise regimen with proven results.

Most importantly, your overarching goal in developing a fitness routine should be to improve your health and live a longer, happier life. If your goal is simply to look good, fit into your favorite pair of pants or impress your friends, you'll likely get sidetracked by minor challenges and lose your motivation. Although the first few weeks of any new routine will be a challenge, you'll eventually stop questioning whether exercise is worth your time and energy; it simply becomes part of your day, like waking up in the morning, going to work or falling asleep at night.

A daily calendar, a tape measure and an apple. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Make It Fun**

Fun is a key ingredient to a successful long-term fitness plan. You are far more likely to make exercise a regular part of your life if you actually look forward to it. Find activities you enjoy and exercises that make you feel good, and incorporate them into every workout. If you recruit a gym buddy and commit to meeting them regularly, you are less likely to skip out on exercise. Similarly, your favorite music CD or television show can make your time on the treadmill fly by.

If the gym isn't appealing, there are dozens of activities you can do at home, such as gardening, household chores like mopping or vacuuming, jogging around the neighborhood, dancing, and so forth. On a beautiful day, use exercise as an excuse to explore new places, parks or historic spots, or play volleyball or tennis outside. Researchers at the Mayo Clinic suggest that the calories people burn doing everyday activities are often as important as focused exercise. For example, an obese person sits 150 minutes more each day than a thin person. By working physical activity into mundane daily activities, like taking five-minute breaks to walk around, pacing while on the phone, or taking the stairs instead of the elevator, you can burn off excess weight without even stepping into a gym!

After a couple of weeks of exercising, you'll have more energy during the day, sleep better at night and start noticing physical differences in your body. Enjoy these benefits! Vary your exercise routine to include weight-lifting, walking or running on the treadmill, aerobic classes, swimming and other activities to make each day interesting. Making exercise fun requires that you understand your likes and dislikes, so get thinking and make a plan that is finely tailored to your particular definition of fun.

Honesty Is the Best Policy

Telling yourself little white lies about your diet and exercise habits is one of the quickest ways to sabotage your health plan. No one knows your eating and exercise patterns like you do, and therefore, no one is more qualified to hold you accountable than you. Did you eat healthy foods today? How many times did you work out last week? Most people answer these questions with half-truths. *Half-truth:* "I'm eating healthy. I ate fruit for breakfast, a salad for lunch and roasted chicken breast for dinner." Great, but what about all of the snacks spread throughout the day - the chip here, the soda there - and the dessert after every meal?

Full-truth: You consumed 2,500 calories but convinced yourself you consumed only 1,500. The sad reality is, if you drink an extra soda every day for a year, you'll gain 15 pounds! Those little snacks and treats add up throughout the day, and if you can't be honest with yourself about how much you're eating, or how frequently (or infrequently) you exercise, you can't begin to fix problem areas.

Learning to look at nutrition labels and estimate the number of portions you consume is an important first step in being honest with yourself. According to the USDA, one serving equals:

- 1 slice of whole-grain bread
- 1/2 cup of cooked rice or pasta
- 1/2 cup of mashed potatoes

- 3-4 small crackers
- 1 small pancake or waffle
- 2 medium-sized cookies
- 1/2 cup cooked vegetables
- 1 cup (4 leaves) lettuce
- 1 small baked potato
- 3/4 cup vegetable juice
- 1 medium apple
- 1/2 grapefruit or mango
- 1/2 cup berries
- 1 cup yogurt or milk
- 1 1/2 ounces of cheddar cheese
- 1 chicken breast
- 1 medium pork chop
- 1/4 pound hamburger patty

It can be difficult to memorize what 1 cup, 2 ounces or 1/4 of a pound looks like, but comparing portions to everyday items can help. For example, use the following portion comparisons, provided courtesy of WebMD:

- Vegetables or fruit is about the size of your fist.
- Pasta is about the size of one scoop of ice cream.
- Meat, fish or poultry is the size of your palm (minus the fingers).
- Snacks such as pretzels and chips are about the size of a cupped handful.
- A potato is the size of a computer mouse.
- A bagel is the size of a hockey puck.
- One pancake is the size of a compact disc.
- Steamed rice is the size of a cupcake wrapper.
- Cheese is the size of a pair of dice or the size of your whole thumb (from the tip to the base).

If you aren't seeing results, it may be time to re-evaluate the amount of food you're consuming, as well as how much time you're actually exercising. Do you go to the gym three days a week, but spend most of your

"workout time" resting? Put yourself in check by monitoring your heart rate. Your ideal active heart rate depends on factors such as your age, weight and health history, so consult your doctor to determine the heart rate that will guarantee a good workout. At the peak of your workout, you should be out of breath, but able to carry on a conversation. Many personal trainers, nutritionists and health care professionals also recommend keeping a food and exercise journal. This will help you track every ounce of food and every minute of exercise, and keep those little white lies to a minimum.

Don't Buy Into Quick Fixes

Man and woman exercising with barbells. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark When it comes to getting in shape, it's no time to be trendy. Just as fad diets are a recipe for disaster, quick-fix health plans inevitably will leave you frustrated and discouraged, and most likely, back to sitting on the couch. In order to achieve long-term success, you must approach diet and exercise as a big-picture improvement to your life.

There are a number of common quick-fix schemes that attract the unwary. A favorite among dieters is the misplaced motivation to get in shape for a special event - a wedding, holiday celebration or reunion. Unfortunately, this quick-fix usually fails miserably because you deprived yourself and looked dynamite for the big day; but then gained all the weight back - and more - afterward.

Another quick-fix gaining in popularity, despite the negative press and lack of supporting evidence, is diet pills. Alli, the over-the-counter version of Xenical, is the latest drug to promise quick and easy results. As with most diet pills, it comes with significant risks, like harsh effects on bowel control, and no guarantee of results. According to the American Dietetic Association, spending on weight-loss products in the U.S. reached \$43 billion in 2004. You'd be much wiser to invest your money in a gym membership.

If you find it difficult to identify these quick-fix solutions to getting in shape, ask yourself the following questions, based on *The American Dietetic Association's Complete Food and Nutrition Guide* (3rd ed., Wiley 2006). If your answer to any of these questions is yes, the product is likely a quick-fix that's just too good to be true.

- Does it make claims of "revolutionary" or "miraculous" results, or use scare tactics, emotional appeals or a money-back guarantee to lure you in? Is there science to support these "proven results"?
- Does it use nonscientific terms like "rejuvenate," "detoxify" or "balance your body with nature"? Does

it claim to increase stamina, strength or immunity?

- Does it offer "proof" based on personal testimonials (often by paid actors) rather than sound science?
- Does it recommend taking supplements as "insurance" for everyone or encourage taking very large doses of nutrients? Remember, supplements can be highly beneficial, but taking too much may be harmful. These decisions should be made with your health care provider.
- Does it claim that this one product can cure all that ails you, from arthritis to cancer to sexual dysfunction?
- Does it make unrealistic claims such as "reverses the aging process" or "cures disease," or does it promise to be "quick and easy"?
- Does it blame the food supply as the source of health problems, disparage government regulations or attempt to discredit the advice of recognized medical authorities?
- Does it boast a "secret formula" or fail to list ingredients or possible side effects on the label?

An honest evaluation of these questions should prevent you from buying into a misleading quick-fix. To all of our dismay, there is no magic pill that makes you thin and healthy. A long-term fitness plan, tailored to your interests and health needs, is the only sustainable way to get and stay in shape. The concept is complex in its simplicity: eat less, move more.

You Deserve It

In our celebrity-obsessed culture, we have been brainwashed to believe long-term success requires having a personal trainer, personal chef and personal nutritionist at our beckon call. If you aspire to be a swimsuit model or the latest pop music icon, perhaps these things, plus five hours a day in the gym, would be necessary. But for most of us, all we really need is a plan and some motivation. We don't expect family, friends or jobs to change overnight, and we should give ourselves the same latitude. It's more important to take a moderate approach to a long-term plan than to achieve remarkable, but unsustainable short-term results.

There's no way around the fact that diet and exercise are essential for a healthier, longer life. Making decisions you are proud of can change your self-image and your entire perspective on life. Most Americans are overbooked, overtired and overextended: working, running children to various events, doing constantly for others. Your body is one of the few things in the world that is uniquely yours. So indulge - and give yourself the gift of good health.

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