

WHOLE HEALTH: INFORMATION FOR VETERANS

Get Moving: Adding Physical Activity into Your Routine



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

Get Moving: Adding Physical Activity into Your Routine

Why is moving the body important?

The health benefits of movement and exercise can be traced back to early civilization. Sports and exercise became popular in the United States during the mid-1800s. As cities and suburbs grew and office work became more common, people exercised less. They also had more health problems. This led to the invention of jogging, and in 1963 the first jogging manual was published. ¹ Unfortunately, adults still struggle to be active and there are fewer physical education classes in schools for kids.²

An active lifestyle decreases the risks of long-term health problems. This is partly because moving regularly decreases inflammation in the body. Inflammation is at the center of many diseases.³ Studies show that activity is linked to lower levels of obesity, sexual dysfunction, some types of cancer, diabetes, heart disease, fatty liver disease, chronic pain, and arthritis.^{4,5} It also helps people with mental health problems like anxiety and depression.⁶

The key is to ask yourself, what sort of activity routine would be right for you?

What if I have limited mobility?

Different health issues limit how people can be active. Each person has to explore what healthy activity is best for their individual needs. Many exercises like yoga, tai chi, strength training, and aerobics can be modified for people with limited mobility due to chronic pain or injury. There are an increasing number of fitness apps available for people with different mobility requirements. Physical activity is also incorporated into programs through the [Wounded Warrior Project](#) and the [MOVE! Weight Management Program](#), both of which have experience working with disabled Veterans. All VA's with Spinal Cord Injury/Spinal Cord Disability centers have adapted gyms with equipment for people with movement limitations. The VA holds National Wheelchair Games every year as well. See what programs and resources are available through your local VA and ask your health care team which ones are right for you.

What are the different types of physical activity?

Physical activity is often thought of as exercise. Experts group exercises in the follow ways:

- **Endurance exercises** increase heart rate.
- **Strength exercises** build stronger muscles.
- **Balance exercises** prevent falls.
- **Flexibility exercises** prevent muscle and joint injuries.

All four types of exercise are important to your overall health.⁷ They can help prevent and treat many long-term diseases affecting the heart, brain, lungs, bones, and joints. Examples of each type of exercise are described in Table 1 below. If you have issues that limit you with doing some of these exercises, think about what you can do instead.

Table 1: Four types of exercises identified by the National Institute of Aging⁷

Endurance Exercises	Strength Exercises	Balance Exercises	Flexibility Exercises
Brisk walking	Using resistance bands	Yoga	Yoga
Dancing	Lifting weights	Tai Chi	Stretching

Movement is another way to think about physical activity. We may not always have time to exercise, but we naturally move our bodies as part of our daily lives. Examples of exercise and movement are described in Table 2 below. The remainder of this handout will focus on movement.

Table 2: Examples of exercise and movement

Exercise	Movement
Taking an aerobic exercise class	Riding a bicycle instead of driving
Lifting weights at the gym	Parking farther away for a longer walk
Jogging	Taking the stairs
Swimming	Carrying heavy objects

Movement is easier to add into our daily routine than exercise. It doesn't require us to invest as much time. Studies show that people who live the longest tend to "move naturally" throughout the day.⁸ Not only is it more efficient, but it also prevents us from sitting for long stretches of time. In fact, we now know that being inactive for too long increases our risk of dying earlier of diseases like cancer.⁹ Being more active prolongs our lives.

How can I become more active by moving naturally?

There are many ways to "get moving" without giving up too much of your free time. Here are a few ideas.

- If possible, avoid the elevator and take the stairs. You can burn calories "two to three times faster climbing stairs than walking briskly" on flat ground.¹⁰
- Park farther away from the front door and walk a little more whenever possible. Many studies have shown that people who live in cities walk more and weigh less than people who live farther away from the city.¹¹
- If you can, skip the car altogether and bike or walk. People who commute to work by biking or walking instead of driving tend to weigh less.¹²
- If you live far from where you are going, consider driving part of the way and walking the rest of the way.
- Choose hobbies that allow you to be active without realizing you are exercising. This may include gardening, dancing, or playing in the park, among other activities.

If you keep moving throughout the day, it may help prevent serious diseases later in life.

What are some other benefits of movement?

As stated above, movement in your daily life may improve your long-term health. It can also help the environment by decreasing carbon emissions. When you use your car less, your carbon footprint decreases. When you take the stairs, you use less electricity. You also save money on gas by choosing to walk or bike instead of drive. Increasing your movement throughout the day may even improve your chances of staying active for longer. Jerry Morris was one of the first people to research jogging, and he continued to swim or jog for thirty minutes every day until he was 99 years old!¹³

For you to consider:

- How can moving your body help you with your long-term health conditions?
- What are three ways you can increase movement in your daily life?
- Do you have time to add exercise too? If so, what is the best exercise for you?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For More Information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veterans Health Administration	Variety of Whole Health handouts on working the body	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp
VA "Whole Health" Website	Video "A Patient Centered Approach to Working Your Body," 10 th video in "Components of Health and Well-Being" Video Series	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/video/video-downloads.asp
VA "MOVE! Weight Management" Program	Website describing MOVE! program options <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links to a variety of handouts and worksheets on physical activity • Links to videos • Description of MOVE! Group Sessions (Contact your primary care provider for a referral) • Link to the MOVE! Coach mobile app, a program that allows you to set, track and achieve your goals on your own. 	http://www.move.va.gov/index.asp

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ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Go4Life program from the National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health	Exercises, activity logs, tips, tools, and more	https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/exercise-physical-activity

This handout was written by Sagar Shah MD, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on two documents for clinicians: 1) Educational Overview: Working Your Body, written by Surya Pierce, MD, ABIHM, RYT and 2) Passport to Whole Health: A Personal Health Planning Reference Manual, written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

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