

Even a little exercise can mean big improvements in your health

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Everyone knows exercise is good for you. But not everyone knows just how good. When you see the health benefits of physical activity in a list, they can seem almost too good to be true.

Exercising consistently can help prevent heart disease and muscle weakness; control and treat chronic conditions such as diabetes, arthritis and hypertension; increase bone and muscle strength; improve brain function and sleep; and boost mood and enhance your overall quality of life, says Dori E. Rosenberg, an associate investigator with the Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute.

And it does all that without causing the side effects of some of the prescription drugs used to treat those conditions.

While the share of Americans who exercise regularly is climbing, many are still lagging behind.

Only about half of adults get the 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity (such as brisk walking) or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity (such as jogging) recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than a quarter of Americans are almost completely inactive, reporting virtually no exercise at all in a year, according to the latest survey by the Physical Activity Council. That means millions of Americans are missing out on potential health benefits.

Becoming — and remaining — consistently active can be a challenge, even when you understand all the benefits. So follow the advice below to find easy ways to get moving, whether that means taking walks around the neighborhood, hitting the gym or investing in home fitness equipment. Before you know it, aerobic exercise will be a regular part of your routine.

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Making a detailed, concrete plan rather than setting an overarching goal can also help you follow through, says Katherine L. Milkman, a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and co-director of the Behavior Change for Good Initiative.