

# My Personal Notes on Personal Fitness

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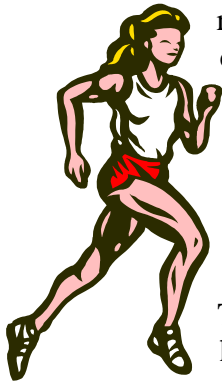
## Introduction

I decided to put together some of my thoughts on physical fitness in the form of a monograph. I'm obviously not an exercise physiologist or training expert, but I have spent a lot of time over the last six or seven years figuring out what works for me to stay active and physically fit. I am sharing these notes as a way to encourage friends and family members to consider taking some steps—small or large—toward improved cardiovascular fitness.

People become interested in personal fitness for many reasons. I think the three most common reasons are probably athletics, appearance, and health. *Athletics* refers to exercise that will lead to better performance in competitive sports, such as improving one's time in road running or getting in shape for a city basketball league. Athletic improvement is probably not relevant to most of us unless we actually choose to participate in amateur sports of some kind. *Appearance* has to do with “toning up” and improving one's personal attractiveness, for yourself and also for your spouse and friends. You may want to feel comfortable wearing particular styles of clothing, or be treated with more kindness and compliments by friends and co-workers. Finally, personal *health* (physical and emotional) is probably the best reason to consider improving fitness for one's long-term well-being and stamina. It is widely agreed that individuals who work to stay physically fit have fewer chronic health problems, recover more quickly from illness or injury, and enjoy interesting physical activities of all kinds.

## Fat and Fitness

One aspect—but not the sole aspect—of fitness is a decrease in body fat. The equation to reduce body fat is simple: one must burn more calories than one consumes. Most diets try to do this with gimmicks by just reducing calorie intake, but it is easier to tip the equation if one also burns more calories. For a sedentary “average” female it is likely that only 1700 calories or so are needed to maintain the body each day. By increasing to a moderate activity level (e.g., walking several miles per week) the daily calorie requirement increases to perhaps 2000. That's the equivalent of the calories in two cans of regular pop per day.



So, if you continue to consume the same amount of calories but increase your activity level, the difference will come from burning fat, right? Well, yes, but the missing calories can also act insidiously as your body reacts by making you feel more tired and lethargic so that you are unconsciously compelled to reduce your other energy needs! Thus, it is vitally important to realize that your body's *physiology* can have a strong effect upon your *psychology*. Your emotional state will be affected as you tip the calorie balance and work on fitness: you may feel

tired, slightly depressed, or crave some calories. Just knowing that this emotional effect is going to happen can help you avoid the problem of extra eating. When you start to feel that way, *notice it and feel good about it!* It means that your calorie balance has been pushed in the right direction, and you are already making a difference! Just don't give in by eating more or resting more than normal.

In my opinion, it doesn't work to measure fitness achievement by weight loss. Weight can fluctuate up and down from day to day (consider that one liter of water weighs 2.2 pounds), and it's also hard to evaluate muscle gain vs. fat loss and all the other interactions. Instead, I suggest that you measure achievement by evaluating your improved aerobic fitness. Loss of body fat is part of fitness, but perhaps more important is the increase in cardiopulmonary efficiency, lower heart rate, increased joint flexibility, and so forth.

### ***Habits, Lifestyle, and Burning More Calories***

I think the best way to burn more calories is to spread the activity over your whole day. In other words, try to increase your "daily base" of activity by spending more time moving and less time sitting. Here are a few simple things to try. *Note that you essentially must change your philosophy about daily physical activity.*

- During TV commercials get up and walk upstairs to fold laundry, or go outside and clip weeds for a few minutes. Prime time TV has over 16 minutes of ads per hour, and daytime TV has 20 minutes or more ads per hour. That's between a quarter and a third of the time! Using all that commercial time to wash a few dishes, dust the room, run the vacuum, pick up after the kids, etc., will use extra calories—maybe 20% more than sitting in a chair.
- Don't ever say to yourself "I'll leave that item by the stairs and then take it up when I have several things to carry," or "I'll wait to take out the garbage until it's time to go pick up the kids." It may seem clever to combine trips, but don't be clever when it comes to physical activity: take it *now* and enjoy the exercise. You may repeat some steps and make more trips around the house, but that's the whole point!
- Deliberately park your car at the far end of the parking lot when you reach your destination. We often feel like we "win" when we cruise around to find the closest parking space, but allow your legs to work for you.
- Try to find other no-cost opportunities to exercise. Go down by the lake and find places where you can walk while the kids ride their bikes or play at the playground. When visiting the mall, park at an entrance far from your destination and enjoy walking a loop through the shops before you make your purchase. If you arrive early for an appointment, don't sit and read a magazine: spend five minutes walking around the block.



Feel GOOD about yourself when you do some exercise! Even simple things can make good progress toward fitness.

### ***An Exercise Plan Based on Walking***

Here is a suggestion on how to start a reasonable daily exercise routine. This is certainly not the only way to do it, so perhaps you will think of your own plan. That's fine: just choose something you can start easily and stick with from day to day and week to week in a *sustainable* fashion, no matter what the weather or how energetic you feel.

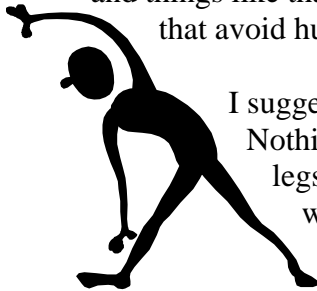
- Start at home and drive the car on an interesting route until the odometer shows that you have traveled half a mile. Make a note of the location. Now if you walk from home to this point and back and know you have covered one mile.
- Do the one mile walk the first time at a comfortable pace and carefully record how long it takes. My guess is that you should be able to walk the mile in about 20 minutes, but perhaps it will be more or less time. Also note how you feel: any aches or pains? Are you out of breath? Continue to do this walk every day at a comfortable pace and keep track of the daily time for two weeks.
- Then, for the next two weeks, continue to walk the mile every day, but *every other day* do it as a "push" walk: consciously make yourself walk slightly faster than you would normally walk. The idea is to get slightly winded, but not so much that you can't carry on a conversation.
- For the next month start walking for *time* rather than the one mile distance. Walk 10 minutes from home, then turn around and walk back for a total of 20 minutes. About three times per week do this as a "push" walk.
- Every now and then walk your one mile route and check your time. I suspect you can get to 15 minutes or less (4+ miles per hour) after you have been walking for a month or two.
- As time goes by, aim for increasing your total walk time to at least 30 minutes nearly every day. You might think about getting a portable tape or CD player and listening to talking books on tape from the library, or just enjoy the time outdoors.

Notice how you feel before, during, and after exercise. Start sensing if your heart is working hard. How far do you walk before you notice perspiration? How often do you breathe? Do you feel any pinching in your shoes? What part of your foot touches the ground first? How long does it take for your heart to slow down to normal after you stop walking hard? Do you walk with your toes pointing in, out, or straight ahead? Do you have good posture? Just take the time to learn how exercise makes your body feel.

While walking imagine that there is a group who will be rating your "style" like Olympic ice skating or gymnastics. Think about posture, leg position, arm swing, and so forth. Would you get a perfect 10 for your walking style? If not, can you adjust your stride to

be smoother and cleaner? Try it and consciously adjust the motion of your arms, legs, and torso.

If you feel any pain or stress in your feet, ankles, hips, etc., try adjusting your gait slightly by leaning a bit forward or backward, pointing your toes differently, wiggling your toes, and things like that. You will probably find that you can make small adjustments that avoid hurting your joints.



I suggest doing some *light* stretching after walking.

Nothing jerky, bouncy, or pulling!! Move your arms and legs through their whole range of motion. Bend the wrists and elbows and wiggle your fingers. Sit and wiggle your ankles and toes. Stand with your hands on your hips and do some easy twists and

circles at the waist. Put your hands behind your neck and do some easy neck turns and rotations. As when walking, take a moment to notice how the stretching feels and how the joints move.



## **Food and Drink**

Beverages--get in the habit of drinking more water. Try to drink enough that your urine is almost colorless much of the time. It often happens that people feel hungry when, in fact, they are actually slightly dehydrated. Maintaining good hydration also helps avoid feeling lazy and lethargic on warm days. Common lore suggests that caffeine in drinks and food may be diuretic (stimulating urine production), but sports medicine studies don't link moderate caffeine use with dehydration. Nevertheless, you can judge for yourself your personal hydration and make beverage choices accordingly. You may want to choose a walking or running route with a convenient potty stop until you discover your personal water balance.

Food--just keep eating well and healthy. The main (and obvious) requirement is to reduce portions. Don't snack while fixing dinner, don't take seconds, and don't eat leftovers just because you hate to see them go to waste. Better waste than waist! When you pass up extra food, be sure to *notice* that you made a positive decision and feel good about your progress and personal discipline.



Work to eliminate spontaneous calories due to having cookies, ice cream, and candy around the house. Have lots of fruit, and figure out ways to make fruit a treat. Cut up fruit for a mixed fruit salad for dessert. Get sugar-free Jello and make fruit treats. Try some spicy alternatives to starches and bland carbohydrates. For example, have a ham-only sandwich with just mustard instead of a sandwich with ham, mayo, and cheese. Mix some lean beef with lettuce and add salsa for

a dinner salad. When dining out try to head toward a sandwich shop for a lean turkey and veggie sandwich instead of fast-food burgers and fries. Just simple things like that will lower your total calorie intake a few percent, which is a big change as time goes on.



### ***Final Thoughts***

I'm hopeful that these ideas are accepted in the helpful spirit that I intended. There are many, many different approaches to fitness, but my suggestion is to start with the "aerobic base" of regular daily activity and inexpensive exercise such as walking. If you can stick with a regular walking routine it is much more likely that you will be successful if you later decide to start lifting weights, join a recreation club, or start taking part in community fun-runs or charity walks. My final point is to emphasize that personal fitness is *not* something that you engage in for a month or two and then don't have to worry about anymore, it is something that has to become part of your regular lifestyle.