

THE ULTIMATE WORKOUT

You don't need a celebrity trainer to stay in shape. This get-fit plan is super easy to stick with (and guaranteed to give you quick results).

THE EXPERT:

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Lots of exercise plans take a highly targeted approach: Some have a bias for beefy biceps, others focus only on constant cardio, and still others fixate on abs—literally ad nauseam. Now that may suit a sports- or image-related need, but adopting a simple, sustainable wellness routine makes more sense in the long run. While we all understand that any type of movement is better than hours logged in our favorite chair, many of us have no idea that specific types of exercise can prevent or even reverse disease.

Although each of us has a unique personality and genetic makeup, our

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bodies all function in much the same way. They produce cells as rapidly as we need them—unless something happens to impair the process. When cellular reproduction begins to slow down, pain, injury, or disease can result. What's the fix? Keep moving: Cartilage, bone, ligament, muscle, and nerves are just a few of the tissues that can regenerate if circulation increases through more muscle movement. Physical activity pulls fresh blood and oxygen—what cells thrive on—toward the muscles and surrounding tissue.

Every one of your body's 650 muscles needs frequent use. When you limit your movement, the body shortens the affected muscles and the connective myofascial tissue that surrounds them. Certain muscles become dormant, circulation and range of motion decrease, and disease and injury become more likely. To ensure all muscles and connective tissues are at their optimal length, get moving with our ultimate exercise plan.

Every day, choose...

Whole-body exercise. Your body functions best with regular whole-body movement. Daily workouts may seem like an indulgence in our overly scheduled days, but for the body's optimum health, exercise is non-negotiable. While gravity

aids the downhill flow of blood from your heart to the rest of the body, returning the blood back up to the heart depends in part on the rhythmic contraction of the leg muscles. When we sit for too long or too often, our leg muscles become inactive, forcing the cardiovascular system to pick up the slack. The heart has to pump harder and more frequently, while the small muscles in the blood vessels have to work the blood uphill by themselves, wearing them out before their time.

Whole-body exercise can range from free-form dancing to walking around your neighborhood. Choose activities that require you to use both sides of your body equally and in which you sit as little as possible. While exercises such as rowing and pedaling a bicycle may be a good way to break a sweat, they don't offer the same health benefits to your organ systems as movement requiring that you carry your own body weight. To see if your exercise preferences qualify as whole-body exercise, ask yourself the following questions: *Am I carrying the majority of my body weight? Do my knees have a chance to straighten? Is my spine straight and not rounded forward as it is when I'm sitting in a chair?* If you answer yes to all, you can feel good about effectively undoing the unhealthy toll that

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sitting takes on your body.

Whole-body exercise covers the basics. Walking, hiking, swimming, and dancing are the best forms of all-over, healthy movement. Ideally, you need an hour of this type of motion a day, but—good news—you don't have to get it in all at once. Taking brisk 15-minute walks four times a day enhances wellness just as much as walking for an hour nonstop.

Range-of-motion exercise

For the most advantageous whole-body movement, you need the motor skill and flexibility to move each joint to its fullest range of motion. Even regular exercisers still spend the greatest portion of their day in a sitting position. The body, able to adjust to almost anything, adapts to constant sitting by shortening tendons, tensing fascia, and reducing blood flow to underused muscles.

The exercises below help undo, in just minutes a day, the most common (unhealthy) posture habits and increase circulation and mobility to muscle systems not regularly used. To keep optimal range of motion, do these daily. When you first start, hold each stretch for 30 seconds, gradually working your way up to a minute per hold.

1. CALF STRETCH

Research shows that small but frequent weight-bearing impacts, also known as vibrations, can maintain and generate bone density. Walking correctly, with the heel striking first, creates these kinds of vibrations up the legs and helps keep the bones of your hips healthy. This exercise for the lower leg and foot eases the tension in the lower leg that causes us to shuffle instead of reaching a full stride.

TRY: Place the front of your left foot on a tightly rolled towel or yoga mat, while keeping the heel of the same foot on the ground. Take a step forward with the right foot, and place it on the ground. Straighten your spine, and move your hips over the back

Get Off the Treadmill

Just like a space shuttle has to push down into the ground to go up, our body needs to push back in order to go forward. While logging miles on a treadmill may be convenient, the mechanics of walking this way often contribute to spine, hip, and knee problems. Because the belt moves backward, our feet meet little or no resistance when they push off. This requires us to lift our legs out in front of us and then fall forward. The hips, knees, and feet, unfortunately, then have to provide the cushioning for the crash landing. For a walking program with the most natural muscle usage and healthiest results, ditch the machinery, and find a nice local park, neighborhood, or mall to stroll in.

foot, holding on to a wall or chair if necessary. Repeat on the other side.

2. HAMSTRING STRETCH

Sitting all day means less blood flow throughout your body. Though you may walk an hour or more a day, often the body has adapted to sitting by shortening the muscles at the back of the legs—even when you're up and about. To lengthen those hamstrings, stretch with a strap.

TRY: Start by lying on your back with your legs outstretched and together. As you inhale, draw your left knee

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the amount of activity through the large lymph nodes—located in the groin—that remove waste from your body.

TRY: Lie on your stomach with your forehead resting on your hands. Bring one leg out to the side, as far toward your head as you can. Rest the inside edge of the foot on the floor and allow your inner thigh to completely relax. Repeat on the other side.

6. THORACIC WALL STRETCH

Stooped posture can affect everything from blood pressure to bone density and, in extreme cases, can lead to kyphosis, also known as widow's hump. This simple stretch reduces excessive curvature in the upper spine, loosens shoulders, and relaxes the neck.

TRY: With legs straight and torso leaning forward, place your hands flat on a wall in front of you. Walk your hands up the wall until they rest just over your head. Without bending your arms, walk backward while leaning your body forward until your torso stretches out like a hammock between your hands and your hips.

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up to your chest, and loop a belt or strap around the ball of the left foot. Holding the strap with both hands, straighten the left leg until the knee is completely straight. Ideally, your leg should be perpendicular to the floor, but you may need to lower your leg somewhat before you can straighten it. Repeat on the other side.

3. TOE DRAG

Although today's urban landscapes require us to wear shoes, our bodies function best when barefoot. Shoes give the small muscles of the feet little reason to move, which in turn lessens the contact your brain keeps with your feet. In part, that translates to less blood flow to the tissues of the foot—a major health issue when it comes to diabetes, high blood pressure, and balance.

TRY: Stand with your feet hip-width apart, and holding on to a chair, reach one leg back, and tuck your toes under until the tops of them rest on the floor. Try not to bend either knee. Repeat on the other side.

4. MID-BACK STRETCH

Tension across the chest can increase mid-back spinal curvature and pressure on the heart and lungs.

TRY: Keeping your hips on the floor, lie over a cushion (or stack of pillows) so it supports your mid-back and head. Lie comfortably with your arms open and palms facing up. Remain here for five minutes or more.

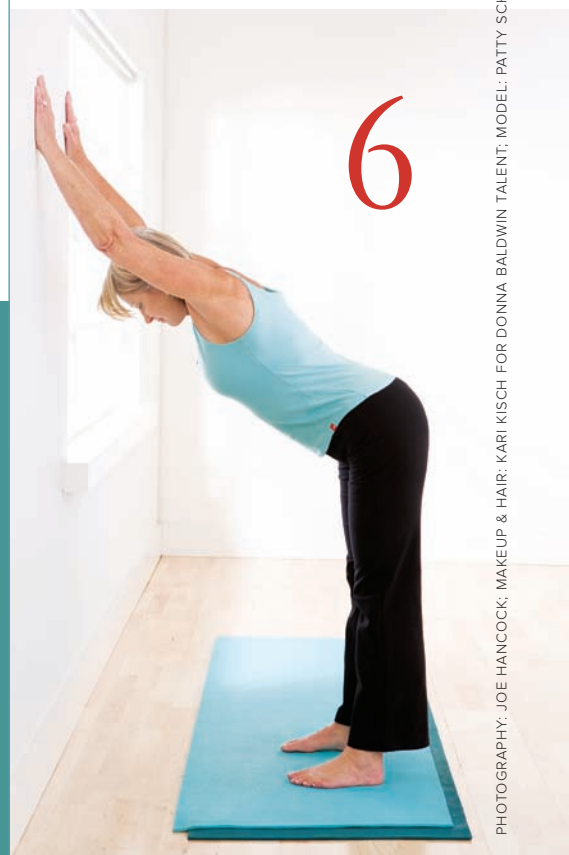
5. PRONE GROIN STRETCH

Keeping your legs bent at the hips most of the time, thanks to sitting, reduces

Make Sure the Shoe Fits

When modern technology meets the feet, it presents us with an unbelievable array of footwear. The best shoe choice for optimal body health? Not wearing any! But because that's not always possible, avoid a shoe that interferes with your natural gait. When walking, the most important part of the gait cycle is the heel strike—when your heel hits the ground before your toes do. This walking pattern requires you to lift your toes, making it less likely for you to stumble. It also generates vibrations up the leg and to the hip, which stimulates bone building.

Ill-fitting shoes can also make the foot too rigid, preventing movement of the foot. Pointed shoes or those with narrow toe space can squeeze the toes into too small an area. Choose footwear that has a minimal or negative heel, a wide toe box that allows your toes to spread, and a flexible sole. Keep a pair of shoes just for walking, making sure they are about a half size larger than your regular dress shoe.



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