

Exercise as Medicine

In recent years, the medical community has increasingly recognized the profound impact of exercise on human health. Beyond its traditional role in weight management and physical fitness, exercise is now viewed as a potent tool for preventing and managing a wide range of chronic diseases. This tool can aid medications and, in some instances, allow individuals to be relieved of medications. In essence, exercise has become a powerful prescription for a healthier life.

Regular physical activity triggers a cascade of physiological changes that benefit various bodily systems. Some of the key mechanisms include:

- **Improved Cardiovascular Health:** Exercise strengthens the heart muscle, lowers blood pressure, and reduces the risk of heart disease, stroke, and heart failure.
- **Enhanced Metabolic Function:** Regular physical activity helps regulate blood sugar levels, reducing the risk of type 2 diabetes. It can also boost metabolism and aid in weight management.
- **Stronger Immune System:** Exercise stimulates the production of immune cells and improves their function, helping the body fight off infections.
- **Improved Mental Health:** Physical activity has demonstrated a reduction in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. It can also enhance cognitive function and memory.
- **Stronger Bones and Muscles:** Weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, running, and weightlifting, strengthen bones and muscles, reducing the risk of osteoporosis and fractures.

If exercise is a form of medicine, what's the dose? Always consult your primary care physician to ensure that you can safely begin an exercise regimen. While the specific exercise needs may vary from person to person, general guidelines recommend the following:

- **Moderate-Intensity Aerobic Activity:** At least 150 minutes per week, such as brisk walking, swimming, or cycling.
- **Vigorous-Intensity Aerobic Activity:** At least 75 minutes per week, such as running or hiking uphill.
- **Muscle-Strengthening Activities:** At least twice per week, targeting all major muscle groups.

It is important to note that you can combine small exercise sessions to accumulate minutes and ultimately reach your goals. For example, if 150 minutes of brisk walking per week sounds intimidating, we can break this down into smaller, realistic “exercise snacks”. $150\text{mins/week} \div 7\text{days/week} = 21\text{minutes/day}$. The daily demand can be reduced to 10 minutes of walking, twice a day. This is now a realistic plan to be incorporated into a busy work and life schedule.

Making exercise a regular part of your life can seem daunting, but it's easier than you might think. Here are some tips to get started:

- **Start Slowly:** Begin with small, achievable goals and gradually increase the intensity and duration of your workouts.
- **Find Activities You Enjoy:** Choose activities that you find fun and rewarding. This will make it easier to stay motivated.
- **Set Realistic Goals:** Set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals to track your progress.
- **Make it a Habit:** Schedule exercise time into your daily routine, just like any other important appointment.
- **Find a Workout Buddy:** Having a workout partner can help you stay motivated and accountable. I must note that a dog is a wonderful walking partner. Regardless of what you have going on in life, a dog will be persistent about the daily walk!

By making exercise a priority, you can improve your overall health, reduce your risk of chronic diseases, and enjoy a higher quality of life. Explore the multiple walking paths around Meigs County that were funded by the Creating Healthy Communities Grant at the Meigs County Health Department and start reaping the benefits of this powerful medicine.

Marc Barr

Meigs County Health Commissioner

