

## Does 'getting physical' help weight control?

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**Background.** It may be time to embrace new attitudes in relation to health, weight loss and physical activity. While Australians spend around \$1 million every day in attempts to lose weight, the number of people who are over their most healthy weight is increasing.

**Objective.** This article discusses practical ways to encourage patients to be more active by emphasising optimal health for each individual.

**Discussion.** Focusing on weight loss as the primary motivation to exercise, from a health and aesthetic perspective, may be the problem. Understanding the barriers to people exercising and focusing on the health benefits rather than the weight loss component is a useful way to get more people to exercise.

The number of Australians over their most healthy weight has increased during the past 30 years. A major reason for this within our 'convenience society' is inactivity. Our current lifestyles do not necessitate the same levels of, or opportunities for, physical activity as they did in the past.

Australians spend \$1 million each day on weight loss, with little effect. A significant amount of money is spent in the area of health promotion, warning people about the health risks of being overweight and the development of chronic diseases such as diabetes, coronary heart disease and stroke. However, much of the money is spent by individuals who have become consumers of industries that see profits in the 'fear of fat'. These industries perpetuate the notion that to be 'healthy' one must fit a culturally defined ideal, which for the vast majority is completely inaccessible. We are bombarded with the idea that leanness guarantees health. There is very little recognition that healthy bodies come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes.

It is unfortunate that a sizeable proportion of the fitness industry has been seduced by the financial potential of the weight loss message. A consequence of this is that physical activity is portrayed primarily as a quick fix solution for perceived weight problems rather than an important component of a healthy, happy life. Many of these exercise environments are completely intimidating to people who do not 'look fit'.

It is estimated that almost 30% of Australian adults do not participate in any activity at all and that 54% of Australian adults do not participate in enough activity to derive any real benefit from it. These figures suggest that new perspectives are needed to encourage people to exercise (Table 1).

## **Table 1. Practical ways to encourage regular physical activity**

- Reinforce that embarking on a more active, healthy lifestyle is a journey, not a destination. Patients should be pleased with the small steps they take and be patient with themselves.
- Talk to your patients about the benefits and potential risks of exercise when they understand these issues they are more empowered to think long-term and maintain a healthy lifestyle.
- Where and when appropriate it may be useful to encourage a consultation with a qualified exercise consultant, who understands the complexities of the weight loss issue, before the commencement of the program. Regular fitness consultations will help to maintain a focus on fitness and well-being rather than body measurements and weight.
- Emphasise the need for an emotionally safe environment. Suggest your patients call their local council and find out about group exercise sessions that are offered. Being part of a nurturing group is a powerful motivator to exercise. Encourage them to take some time to get to know some of the gyms in your area - increasingly, positive body image environments are being offered by these facilities.
- Plan for exercise. Encourage your patients to make appointments with themselves to participate in regular physical activity at manageable times. This includes finding facilities that are easily accessible.
- Reinforce in your patients that they are important and worth looking after. The only person who truly has the power to look after them is themselves.
- Activity should be fun! Help your patients to find what will be enjoyable for them to do by thinking laterally and by encouraging a willingness to try different things. Physical activity does not have to happen in a gym, it could be ballroom dancing, bushwalking or a walk in the park, yoga and stretching, a gentle swim or a bike ride in the sun.
- Take every opportunity for movement. Aiming for an accumulation of 20-30 minutes of activity most days is a great way to start.

### **Barriers to regular physical activity**

#### **Concerns about appearance**

An individual's perception of his or her body appears to be a major barrier to activity. In a 1997 study conducted by Body Image & Health Inc young women said they felt they had to achieve a particular body shape before they could commence an exercise program. Overweight women drop out of exercise classes because of embarrassment about their bodies and concerns about the judgments of other participants. A high level of social physique anxiety (SPA) usually results in poor exercise adherence. Young men with higher levels of body fat are less likely to participate in regular exercise, while appearance anxiety can lead some adolescent boys and girls to cease participation in physical activity.

## **Level of exercise**

'Go hard or go home' and 'No pain, no gain' are just some of the slogans used to motivate and sell physical activity. Many people believe that exercise must be strenuous and of a long duration for it to be effective and this can be a major barrier to participation in any kind of activity. The transition from a sedentary to an active lifestyle is not an easy task. It is a transition made easier by setting realistic goals - like walking to the corner to post a letter. For many people, just getting started is a significant step. The next stage may be to encourage an accumulation of activity - eventually aiming for 20-30 minutes most days. Taking every opportunity for movement is something that should be encouraged and applauded.

It appears that intensity of exercise has little effect on weight loss in individuals who are over their most healthy weight. When regular movement is no longer as challenging, activity sessions of around 30-40 minutes duration in which the individual is still able to carry on a conversation without feeling breathless are recommended. Once a person is at this stage, a focus on cardiovascular fitness is important. Initially, lower intensity activity is easier to maintain, aiming for a target heart rate of 40%-60% of maximum. Due to the perception that exercise has to be strenuous, many individuals make inappropriate activity choices. These choices usually involve high impact activities that are very strenuous and often not enjoyable, nor are they advisable to the individual who is over his or her most healthy weight. Brisk walking on land or in water is an underrated form of physical activity.

## **Physical activity and weight loss**

Although the health benefits of regular physical activity are significant and acknowledged as an important component of a healthy lifestyle, its role in weight loss, particularly in women, appears to be modest. An analysis of over 50 research findings on exercise and its effect on body composition found that men, running or walking three times per week for just over 30 minutes each session, resulted in a mean weight loss of 0.08 kg/week. Women undertaking similar activity four times per week for slightly less than 30 minutes achieved an average weight loss of 0.05 kg/week. However, it does appear that regular physical activity, coupled with some reduction in energy intake, is important in weight maintenance and the continuation of weight and fat loss and an increase in, or maintenance of, fat free mass.

## **The benefits of regular physical activity**

Research findings indicate that thinking may need to be adjusted about the relationships between being overweight, health and physical activity. Participation in regular physical activity results in increased aerobic capacity and cardiovascular endurance. In individuals who are over their most healthy weight this can be up to 20% when the focus is on endurance training. The work of Tremblay et al suggests that regular moderate intensity exercise can bring about changes in blood lipid levels and normalise insulin and glucose responses. A recent study of nearly 22,000 men showed that overweight fit men had a lower risk of mortality than unfit lean men. Blair and associates were able to display similar trends in 3,120 women. They showed that fit, overweight

women had lower morbidity and mortality rates than their inactive counterparts.

Regular physical activity also enhances:

- self-perception
- quality of life
- mood states
- levels of concentration
- emotional well-being and body image.

The elevation in mood can influence food choices, thus facilitating the weight loss process.

### **Focus on health not weight loss**

Losing weight is a very complex issue and process. The physical and psychological health benefits of adhering to regular physical activity are significant and should be the main focus; any weight loss should be seen as a by-product of the healthy lifestyle.

Studies have shown that when people, particularly those above their most healthy weight, exercise in an emotionally safe environment where they do not feel like they are being judged, their adherence to physical activity is higher. When participants are educated about the health benefits of physical activity and are taught to focus on these benefits, they are empowered to understand how their behaviours are related to a healthy lifestyle and well-being.

Using weight loss as the sole measure of success is setting patient up for failure. The promotion of exercise as a weight loss tool causes individuals to have unrealistic expectations. When the weight loss is not rapid many become disheartened and give up. This is where a very broad range of motivations to exercise are beneficial in maintaining adherence and enhanced health and self-esteem.

### **Summary of Important Points**

- A major component of our increase in weight is related to our decrease in exercise.
- 54% of Australian adults do not participate in enough exercise to achieve any benefit from it.
- Barriers to exercise include concern about looking overweight and the myth that exercise must be strenuous to be of benefit.
- Physical activity confers small advantages to losing weight; however, it provides

significant physical benefits.

➤ Men and women who exercise have significantly lower mortality risks compared to a similar cohort in the same weight range.

➤ Using weight loss as the sole measure of success sets patients up to fail.