

ESRD Patient News

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Get Active Together Social Support Can Help Keep You Moving

Physical activity has many benefits. Walking, running, biking, swimming, lifting weights, playing sports, and moving more can add years to your life. Physical activity can improve your health, mood, and energy levels. But sometimes, the inspiration to get moving may be lacking. That's when friends, family, and other social connections can help.

Research has shown that connecting with others, called social support, can help us get active and make changes to improve our health. Other people can help us start, continue, or increase how much we move. They can also help us make physical activity a habit.

"We still have a lot to learn about the different effects that social support can provide. But it's long been recognized that people who have greater social support

tend to be more physically active," says Dr. Elise Rice, an NIH expert in behavioral and social science. "There are many different types of social support."

Social support doesn't only include people you already know. It can include groups that help get you moving, like walking or hiking clubs. It can also mean going to exercise classes, whether in person or online. There are even social media communities that provide social support for exercise.

Social support can help people of all ages and abilities get more physical activity, even those with chronic (long-lasting) health problems.

The More the Merrier

Social support can make physical activity more fun and inviting. And being active is an important goal for just about everyone.

Regular physical activity can reduce the risk of serious health conditions. These include heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer. Activity can boost brain health, improve sleep, and more.

Yet most American adults do not get the recommended amounts of physical activity. That's at least two and a half hours of moderate activity, such as brisk walking, each week. Muscle-strengthening activities, like lifting weights, are also recommended at least twice a week.

Getting in that much activity might seem challenging. "But really, any amount of physical activity is better than none," says Dr. Laurie Friedman Donze, a clinical psychologist at NIH who oversees heart health research programs. "Even short bursts of activity throughout the day can be helpful, like 5 or 10 minutes at a time."

There are many ways that friends and others can help you get and stay active. "Companionship is part of it," Donze explains. "Being active with someone can make physical activity more enjoyable. It can provide encouragement that keeps you going. And research has found that social support can increase self-efficacy, which is the feeling that you can do something and be successful."

Finding physical activity you enjoy is often key to success, Donze says, "Because if you don't enjoy it, it'll be hard to make it into a daily or weekly habit."

Plan Together

Making a plan with someone and sticking to it can be especially helpful. Agree to meet at certain times to get active together. Or agree to check in with each other regularly at specific times. You can share successes and struggles.

"If you make a plan to be active with a friend or family member, you're more likely to keep that commitment. You'll meet with them as promised," Donze says. "It helps keep you accountable."

Research shows that interacting with others can also help you to set and meet goals. People can help each other be physically active even if they're not exercising together. "They can share information about important resources, like good exercise classes or nice places to walk or hike," Donze says.

And it can help if you make it fun. One NIH-supported study found that a game-based approach helped people get active after hospital discharge. Study participants wore a step-tracking device. They received game points and positive feedback for meeting step goals. Each also chose a supportive partner, like a friend or family member, to help keep them accountable. The partners received email updates on participants' progress. They also provided encouragement.

By the end of 12 weeks, people who had higher social engagement had a significant increase in daily steps. A follow-up study is underway to see if an online coach can boost activity even more.

Overcoming Obstacles

"Certain groups of people have specific barriers that can keep them from getting active," Rice explains. "For instance, older adults who've had a major health event like a heart attack may have anxiety or concerns about being physically active."

Yet activity is so important for their health and recovery.”

Some researchers have been studying how mindful practices, like tai chi, can help people with chronic conditions get active. Tai chi is an ancient mind-body practice. It involves certain postures and gentle movements. It often emphasizes breathing patterns, mental focus, and relaxation.

A team led by Dr. Gloria Y. Yeh at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center developed and tested different tai chi programs and classes. Their goal was to encourage physical activity in people with heart or lung diseases.

The team learned that people with serious health conditions often have worries that keep them from getting active. “They may avoid going to the gym because they feel embarrassed that they’re not able to do what other people can do,” Yeh says. “Or they may get short of breath very quickly, which can cause fear and anxiety.”

But Yeh and others found that being part of a group can have a positive impact. “There’s something powerful about the shared experience. They see others who have a similar medical issue who are now able to exercise. It sets an example: If they can do it, I can do that too,” Yeh explains. “The mindful movement classes are really about taking things in small steps, doing what you can to foster the self-confidence to do more.”

There are plenty of ways that social connections can help us get moving. But

it’s also true that social ties are important in their own right. “

Social support in and of itself is really important and essential to health and well-being,” Rice says. See the Wise Choices box for active ways to connect with others.

Caring for Your Mental Health

Overview

Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It is more than the absence of a mental illness—it’s essential to your overall health and quality of life. Self-care can play a role in maintaining your mental health and help support your treatment and recovery if you have a mental illness.

How can I take care of my mental health?

Self-care means taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both your physical health and mental health. This can help you manage stress, lower your risk of illness, and increase your energy. Even small acts of self-care in your daily life can have a big impact.

Here are some self-care tips:

- **Get regular exercise.** Just 30 minutes of walking every day can

boost your mood and improve your health. Small amounts of exercise add up, so don't be discouraged if you can't do 30 minutes at one time.

- **Eat healthy, regular meals and stay hydrated.** A balanced diet and plenty of water can improve your energy and focus throughout the day. Pay attention to your intake of caffeine and alcohol and how they affect your mood and well-being—for some, decreasing caffeine and alcohol consumption can be helpful.
- **Make sleep a priority.** Stick to a schedule, and make sure you're getting enough sleep. Blue light from devices and screens can make it harder to fall asleep, so reduce blue light exposure from your phone or computer before bedtime.
- **Try a relaxing activity.** Explore relaxation or wellness programs or apps, which may incorporate meditation, muscle relaxation, or breathing exercises. Schedule regular times for these and other healthy activities you enjoy, such as listening to music, reading, spending time in nature, and engaging in low-stress hobbies.
- **Set goals and priorities.** Decide what must get done now and what can wait. Learn to say "no" to new tasks if you start to feel like you're taking on too much. Try to appreciate what you have accomplished at the end of the day.
- **Practice gratitude.** Remind yourself daily of things you are

grateful for. Be specific. Write them down or replay them in your mind.

- **Focus on positivity.** Identify and challenge your negative and unhelpful thoughts.
- **Stay connected.** Reach out to friends or family members who can provide emotional support and practical help.

Self-care looks different for everyone, and it is important to find what you need and enjoy. It may take trial and error to discover what works best for you.

Learn more about [healthy practices for your mind and body](#).

When should I seek professional help?

Seek professional help if you are experiencing severe or distressing symptoms that have lasted 2 weeks or more, such as:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Changes in appetite or unplanned weight changes
- Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning because of mood
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of interest in things you usually find enjoyable
- Inability to complete usual tasks and activities
- Feelings of irritability, frustration, or restlessness

How can I find help?

If you have concerns about your mental health, talk to a primary care provider. They can refer you to a qualified mental health professional, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, or clinical social worker, who can help you figure out the next steps. Find [tips for talking with a health care provider](#) about your mental health.

You can [learn more about getting help](#) on the NIMH website. You can also learn about [finding support](#) and [locating mental health services](#) in your area on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website.

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/caring-for-your-mental-health>

Tips for a Healthy Summer

1

Move More, Sit Less!

Get at least **150 minutes** of aerobic physical activity every week.



TIP

Physical activity has immediate benefits for your health: better sleep and reduced anxiety are two.

2

Wear Sunscreen & Insect Repellent

Use shade, wide-brimmed hats, clothing that covers, and broad-spectrum sunscreen with at least SPF 15 for sun protection.

Use insect repellent and wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants to prevent mosquito bites and ticks.



TIPS

Apply sunscreen before insect repellent. After you come indoors, check your clothing, body, and pets for ticks. Reapply sunscreen after 2 hours and after swimming, sweating, or towel drying off.

3

Keep Cool in Extreme Heat

Extreme heat can be dangerous for everyone, but it may be especially dangerous for people with chronic medical conditions.



Stay cool.



Stay hydrated.



Stay informed.

4

5

4

Eat Healthy Foods

Delicious fruits and veggies make any summer meal healthier.



TIP

Healthy eating supports muscles, strengthens bones, and boosts immunity.

5

Choose Your Drinks Wisely

Drink water (fluoridated tap or unsweetened bottled or sparkling) instead of sugary or alcoholic drinks to reduce calories and stay safe.



TIP

Add slices of fruit to water for a refreshing, low-calorie drink.

6

Don't Use Tobacco

You can quit tobacco today! Find the [free quitting support](#) that's right for you.



Call 1-800-QUIT-NOW.



Download the [QuitSTART App](#).



Access smokefree [tools and tips](#).

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