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Physical Activity Guidelines

Last fall the federal government released their first comprehensive activity recommendations, the ‘2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans’. The accompanying recommendations represent the consensus of 15 of the top physical activity experts in the United States, backed by the first major scientific review on the topic in more than a decade. Though the general message is not much of a surprise (*the more exercise you do, the more benefits you gain*), researchers were able to better identify the types and amounts of activity that are truly necessary to lower risk for chronic diseases and improve overall health.

It is recommended that adults are active at least 150 minutes (2.5 hours) per week. While some older recommendations required daily activity the latest research shows that this may not be necessary as long as the weekly recommendations are met. In addition, muscle-strengthening activities should be included at least two days per week. These are very important as they help to decrease age-associated muscle loss and maintain bone health.

Older adults should follow the same guidelines as their abilities and conditions allow. The benefits of activity far outweigh the risks for nearly everyone, and increasing activity slowly can help to decrease risk for injury. However, if safety is a concern you should certainly consult with a health professional before beginning to increase your activity level.

To be considered health-enhancing, activities should be at least as intense as a brisk walk and undertaken in 10-minute segments. While more vigorous activities like running are certainly beneficial they are not necessary to fulfill the guidelines. And most importantly, this does not need to be exercise!! Exercise is structured, repetitive, and at times, boring (gasp!). Staying active can be as simple as walking to work, taking dance lessons, or working in your yard.

The proven benefits of staying active are incredible, and far too numerous to list. In addition, these benefits are generally independent of bodyweight, and physically active people of all bodyweights have lower rates of early death than inactive people. And please keep in mind that *any* activity is better than none at all—some benefits can even be experienced after only 60 minutes of activity per week. However, the benefits are clearly much greater when the guidelines are met.

For more information and recommendations for increasing your activity please visit www.health.gov/paguidelines or www.healthfinder.gov/getactive. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*