

Q

I know I should tell my clients to be physically active, but I am not always sure what to recommend.

Can you provide some information that I could use to help consumers choose physical activities or fitness programs that meet their needs and interests?

A

As health professionals, we need to encourage clients and consumers to participate in physical activity. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of mortality from coronary heart disease and decreases risk of stroke, colon cancer, diabetes and hypertension. In addition, physically fit individuals are better able to control their weight, maintain strong bones, muscles and joints, have fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety and fewer hospitalizations and visits to physicians.

Despite these many health benefits, more than 50% of adults in the United States and more than one-third of teens in grades nine through 12 do not participate in regular physical activity. Even when Americans have leisure time, 25% of them are not active. As our population grows older, it will be more difficult for Americans to become physically active because research shows that activity levels often decrease with aging. Thus, a key message to communicate to clients is that *any* form of physical activity is better than none. Even a walk to the mailbox, to the copier or around the mall counts.

Recommending physical activity guidelines that fit your clients' interests can help motivate them to adhere to a regular and consistent program. Personalizing and being more realistic about recommendations will make it easier for them to adopt a physically active lifestyle.

## Evolving Physical Activity Guidelines

Over the last three decades, the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) has provided guidance in recommending physical activity. While the guidelines have changed dramatically over the years, and while other groups have offered alternative recommendations, the ACSM recommendations still remain the core of any physical activity advice.

In 1978, the ACSM recommended that individuals exercise three to five days a week for 15 to 60 minutes, with an overall goal of burning 300 calories per workout. The next update of these guidelines occurred in 1990. ACSM retained the aerobic component of its advice but added a strength training recommendation and underscored the importance of realistic, personalized advice. The most recent ACSM guidelines were published in 1998, in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). At this time, several new components were added to the guidelines. The aerobic component was increased to a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity on most days of the week. Additionally, ACSM recognized that physical activity has an additive effect, and suggested that three 10-minute bouts of physical activity could provide a benefit similar to that obtained with one 30-minute session. In the same year, ACSM also published a reassuring position statement on the appropriateness of physical activity for older adults.

Today, the 1998 ACSM guidelines are still in use. However, physical activity guidelines are not as clear-cut due to the introduction of recommendations from other well-regarded scientific groups. For example, in 2002, the Institute of Medicine (IOM), a division of the National Academy of Sciences, recommended 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each day. This recommendation set off a debate about which guidelines are best and which guidelines health professionals should recommend to their clients. The answers may be in the details.

## Overall Health versus Body Weight

There has been much discussion about the IOM physical activity guidelines. One concern is that 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each day appears to be a lofty goal, since many Americans are not meeting the 30-minute recommendation. Another concern is that accumulating 60 minutes of physical activity might be difficult for individuals who are just contemplating or beginning a regular exercise program. For both these groups, starting with three 10-minute bouts of physical activity a day may be a more practical goal. Despite the debate, experts agree that the bottom line is—*even a little physical activity is better than none!*

Encouraging clients to participate in moderate physical activity for at least 30 minutes and then urging them to try to do more provides one way to mesh the guidelines. Making recommendations based on health risks might be another way to apply the guidelines. For example, if clients are at risk for breast or colon cancer, you could explain that 45 minutes or more of moderate to

vigorous physical activity is one factor that may help prevent these types of cancer. Many researchers have pointed out that the IOM guidelines were developed with the end-goal of fostering optimal body mass index (BMI) within the healthy range of 18.5 to 25. If a client has a BMI of 25 or less, the ACSM/CDC guidelines might be a reasonable goal. On the other hand, for a client with a BMI over 25 who wants to lose weight, the IOM recommendations would provide more physical activity and, when combined with appropriate caloric restriction, would help promote gradual weight loss.

When it comes to physical activity recommendations, experts agree that both sets of guidelines are accurate and useful for specific goals. Perhaps our greatest challenge is to take time to urge clients to resolve to move away from a sedentary lifestyle and to get started with a practical fitness plan.

### “Stepping Up” Activity

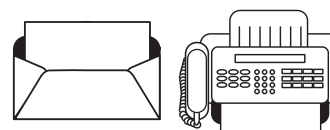
One popular way to get people moving is to encourage use of step counters or pedometers. The goal is to help people balance their food intake and energy expenditure by gradually increasing the number of steps taken each day to reach at least 10,000 steps (the equivalent of about 5 miles of walking). Here are some reasons why people like this approach:

- Pedometers are relatively inexpensive and readily available. (Check within your community for programs distributing them for little or no cost.)
- Step counting is accessible to most healthy people—it doesn’t require any special skill or equipment (other than the pedometer).
- It is easily personalized to individual starting points and goals.
- It’s motivating. People can challenge themselves, friends, family or co-workers to achieve their goals.

### TIPS FOR BEING MORE ACTIVE

- At the mall or work, take the stairs, instead of the elevator.
- If practical, walk or bike to do errands near your home.
- Exercise at lunchtime with co-workers or friends.
- Take 10 minutes several times during the day for a quick walk or stretch break.
- Walk over to speak with coworkers who are in the office instead of sending e-mail messages.
- Go dancing with your spouse or a friend.
- Build time for physical activities into your vacation plans.
- Wear a pedometer and challenge yourself to increase the number of steps you take each day.
- Participate in team sports.
- Pedal a stationary bicycle while watching the news.
- Plan to gradually increase the number of days per week and/or the minutes per session you spend being physically active.
- For more ideas, visit <http://HealthierUS.gov>.

### Send Us Your Questions



Do you have a question that you would like to suggest for a future Practical Practice column? Send it to:

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Please indicate if you would like your name to appear with your question. Published questions will be answered either by members of the Nutrition Update Advisory Committee, health professionals or Kraft Foods staff. We look forward to hearing from you.

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