



## Becoming fit requires developing new habits

Ten years ago the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports warned that we were in the middle of an epidemic of physical inactivity among our nation's youth. Physical education in schools was being cut, and the handwriting was on the wall. This occurred even though the council stated that "inactivity and poor diet cause more deaths annually in our nation than alcohol, microbial agents, sexual behavior, illicit use of drugs and firearms combined."

Today many of these same children are dealing with body weight challenges as young adults, and they may see the same challenges ahead for their young children. With the summer months ahead, this is a great time to involve the whole family in developing a habitually active and more healthful lifestyle.

**QUESTION:** How can you turn a family of couch potatoes into fitness buffs?

**ANSWER:** Not easily or quickly. A rapid change in fitness is impossible and should not be the goal. The most important focus is to develop a habit of daily activity that can continue for a lifetime. Habits take time to form, but once formed, they become the new nor-

mal and they no longer take conscious effort to maintain.

**Q:** What are the first steps in starting a family fitness program?

**A:** The first hurdle for most of us is fitting physical activities into the daily schedule. Finding the time can seem difficult at first, but once the habit is formed, it just becomes part of the daily routine. This is where a slow and steady approach works best.

Small changes in weekday activities can be squeezed into most any schedule to add up and make a difference in fitness over time. Things as simple as walking instead of driving and using stairs instead of the elevator can easily fit into the day. Also, find some fun activities at home that can keep the family on their feet and moving. Whether it is learning to dance or playing table tennis, it all adds up to using muscles and burning calories.

Plan fun weekend family outings to include activities that involve moving, even if it is just walking. This can range from walking to hiking and can include exploring new places or pretending to be a tourist and doing things you haven't done for years. Even shopping that includes a lot of mall walking

can help to accumulate more activity. As fitness slowly develops, more challenging outings become possible and potentially fun.

**Q:** What are reasonable goals for daily physical activity of children and teens?

**A:** The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend that children and adolescents work up to at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity. This activity can be spread throughout the day and can differ from day to day, but even 10-minute bouts of activity can contribute to the recommended daily total.

Children and teens who enjoy organized sports are most likely to stick with a sport when their exercise and competition goals are fun and attainable. When parents and coaches are overly demanding and critical, some children will lose their drive to participate. Keep recreation as the focus and leave winning and losing to be just part of the game aspect.

For seasonal sports, be sure to have other outings ready to substitute during the off-season months. All activities should be fun and invigorating. That makes the habit easy to keep.

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