

10 Easy Ways to Make Exercise a Habit www.webmd.com

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WebMD Weight Loss Clinic-Feature

Let's face it: it's not all that difficult to start a fitness routine. After all, most of us have done it more than once.

The trouble, of course, comes with sticking with it. All too often, our initial enthusiasm and energy wanes, we get distracted by other things going on in our lives, or we don't think we're seeing results quickly enough -- and we throw in the towel.

Yet many people do manage to hang in there, and would no sooner skip their regular workout than their morning shower. What's their secret?

A recent study by researcher Diane Klein, PhD, shed some light on the subject. Long-term exercisers (who had been working out for an average of 13 years) were asked to rank what motivated them to keep up with their regimes.

Their answers might surprise you. The exercisers were not as concerned with powerful pecs and awesome abs as they were with feeling good and being healthy. Here's how the study participants ranked their motivators:

- Fitness
- Feelings of well-being
- Pep and energy
- Enjoyment of the exercise
- Making exercise a priority
- Sleeping better
- Feeling alert
- Being relaxed
- Weight management
- Appearance

So, once you have your priorities in the right place, how can you become one of the fitness faithful?

WebMD has compiled 10 tips for making fitness a habit in your life. To create the list, we sought the help of Klein, along with long-term fitness buff Roy Stevens and his wife, Wanda, who is transforming her hit-and-miss exercise schedule into an almost-daily habit.

1. Do a variety of activities you enjoy. And remember, there's no rule that says you have to go to a gym or buy equipment.

"We've shifted our perceptions from regimented exercise to physical activity," says Klein, assistant professor of exercise, sports and leisure studies, and director of gerontology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Having a variety of activities -- weight lifting, walking, running, tennis, cycling, aerobics classes -- will ensure that you can do *something* regardless of the weather or time of day.

2. Commit to another person. "The social aspect of exercise is important for me," says Wanda Stevens, a stay-at-home mom in Austin, Texas. "I'll let myself off, but if I've agreed to walk with a friend after dinner, I won't let them down."

She is six weeks into an exercise program, thanks in part to her husband's support. Roy Stevens, who works as a management consultant, has become her "in-house personal trainer." They work out together every morning, doing a combination of aerobics, strength training, Tae Bo, and stretching. If he's out of town, he gives her a wake-up call, and she takes the dog for a walk.

3. Make exercise a priority. "It has to be a non-negotiable," says Roy Stevens.

He began exercising to manage his weight when he was in the Air Force band some 20 years ago. "We'd travel, and other guys would get off the bus and go eat wings and drink beer. I'd go running." He's maintained the exercise habit even during his years working 70 hours a week as a restaurant owner.

There's another advantage to making exercise non-negotiable. Friends and family members learn that it's part of your identity, and give up saying things like, "Why don't you take it easy today?"

4. Exercise first thing in the morning. With two preschool children, Wanda Stevens couldn't find time to work out except on a hit-and-miss basis. Any number of things could sabotage her good intentions to walk or go to Pilates class after dinner. But all her excuses vanished once she started getting up before the kids so she could work out.

"I didn't think I was a morning person," she tells WebMD. "But it's working for me."

Experts agree that a morning schedule is best. "If you go to a gym, it should be located between your home and work," says Klein. "Exercise, take a shower, and you're energized for the day."

5. Or, exercise on your way home from work. The next best thing to exercising first thing in the morning is to do it on your way home from work, Klein says.

"Don't go home first," she says. "I learned that the hard way. There aren't a lot of people who are so motivated that after they go home and change clothes will go back out again and exercise."

6. Exercise even when you're "too tired." Chances are, you'll feel better after exercising.

"It energizes us," says Klein. "You breathe deeply, and your body makes better use of the oxygen exchange. You'll get an exercise-induced euphoria during the activity and for some time after."

If Wanda Stevens thinks she is too tired to get up and exercise, Roy shows her no sympathy. "She gets mad, but then she feels better afterwards," he says.

7. Log your activity. Write down the things that are important to you. It could be how much time you exercise each day, how many steps you walked, how far you ran or cycled, what you weighed, etc.

Some people make a game of it. You may have heard of runners calculating the miles it would take to run from their homes to Boston (home of the famous marathon), figuring how far they run in an average week and setting a target date for "arriving" in Boston.

8. Be aware of all the indicators of progress. It's great when your clothes fit better and you can lift heavier weights or work out longer without getting exhausted. But there are a slew of other progress indicators, such as:

- Getting a good night's sleep.
- Thinking more clearly.
- Having more energy.
- Realizing your muscles aren't screaming after you've helped a friend move furniture.
- Seeing your resting heart rate drop over time.
- Hearing your doctor congratulate you on improved cholesterol, blood pressure, bone density, triglycerides, and blood sugars.

9. Walk -- with a pedometer (or a dog). "If you enjoy walking and haven't exercised for awhile, 10 minutes three times a day will give you 30 minutes," says Klein.

Use a pedometer, and work up to at least 10,000 steps a day. "Nobody starts out with 10,000 steps," Klein says. Find out what your daily average is, and, the next week, strive to walk 300 extra steps each day. Increase your steps each week.

"Better yet, walk the dog," Klein says. That's how she motivated her sister to exercise. "Twice a day she walks her dog, which is good for them both and provides companionship."

Wanda Stevens also enjoys walking her border collie and finds there's another benefit: "It relieves the guilt I felt over not giving her enough attention now that we have kids."

10. Reward yourself. Are you telling yourself that you don't deserve a reward for something you should be doing anyway -- or that once you can zip your jeans without lying on the bed, that will be reward enough? Well, honestly, how inspiring is *that*?

Experts say that making behavior changes is hard, and rewards motivate. So decide on a goal and a reward, and work toward it. You might buy yourself a video you've wanted after you stick to your fitness plan for one month, or buy new walking shoes when you achieve 5,000 steps a day. Do whatever works for you.

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SOURCES: *American College of Sports Medicine's Health and Fitness Journal*, March 2004. Diane Klein, PhD, assistant professor of exercise, sports and leisure studies; director, gerontology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Roy and Wanda Stevens, Austin, Texas. WebMD Weight Loss Clinic feature, "Conquer Your Fitness Fears."
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