



Help Your Kids Take a Step in the Right Direction: Be Active

Being active is one great way to help yourself and your family stay healthier. In fact, regular physical activity has so many benefits, it's hard to know where to start.

Getting Fit, Staying Smart

In addition to physical health, activity has some other benefits: mental and emotional well-being. Experts agree that in addition to the stress-busting benefits of regular physical activity, there is a strong connection between it and academic performance. A recent study by the California Department of Education showed that students who are physically fit do better in school.

Make It Fun, Make It Family

The following tips can help you get your entire family moving more often. It's easier than you think.

Make time to feel fine. There are many ways to make sure you and your children are getting enough physical activity. When you drive to the store, park as far from the building entrance as possible. Take the stairs, not the escalator. Walk to a friend's house instead of driving.

Focus on fun. Set aside a time when your family will swap TV/Screen time for Activity time. Try dancing, roller skating, street hockey, or soccer. You can even make up your own family game to get everyone moving.

Encouragement is key. If your children think that they're too uncoordinated, or too uncomfortable to get regular activity, give them lots of encouragement. When they see you exercising, they're more likely to do it too. And if they get more activity, they're more likely to build self-confidence, coordination, and strength.

Be a good sport. Become a member of any kind of organized team sport. And not all "team sports" are school-sponsored football or baseball teams. Many communities have organizations that encourage activity through culturally specific dance and performance teams.

Walking tall. Walking is the most natural way to stay strong. Taking a walk anywhere—to the store, the park, or a friend's house—is a great idea. Make time to walk with your child and set goals around how long and how fast you can walk. Start small, with one 15-minute walk every day, and work up to 30 minutes, then an hour.

Stretch and bend. Yoga, stretching, and resistance movements require very little equipment and very little space. You and your children can start with some very simple stretches and hold them longer each time. Consider borrowing a yoga video or book from your local library.

Warm your form. Get ready for any activity by warming up. It's easy—just shrug your shoulders, tap your toes, swing your arms, or march in place. You should spend a few minutes warming up for any activity, even walking.

Cool it. Slow down your activity little by little. If you have been walking fast, walk slower to cool down. Or stretch for a few minutes. Cooling down may protect your heart, relax your muscles, and keep you from getting hurt.

Trim at the gym. You and your family don't need to join an expensive gym or health club. Most communities have a YMCA or YWCA that caters to family-friendly activities and is also affordable. Community centers also often offer affordable, family-focused exercise and activity classes.

Activity Tips

Warm Up, Stretch Out

No matter what type of physical activity you choose to do, it's important to remember to stretch before and after. Stretching helps to warm up your muscles, reduce your chance of injury, increase circulation, and relieve sore muscles. Be sure to make stretching part of your daily routine.

- Stretching should be done daily whether you are physically active or not.
- Move slowly and evenly into each stretch and never bounce.
- Stretch to the point where you feel light tension, and hold the stretch for 15–20 seconds.
- As you hold the stretch, you should feel the tension in your muscles begin to release.

Leg Stretches

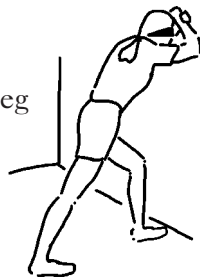
Hamstrings

- Sit on the floor with your right leg straight out in front of you.
- Bend your left leg so the sole of your foot lightly touches the inside of your right thigh.
- Slowly bend forward from your hips toward your right foot until you begin to feel the muscles in your right leg stretch (see figure above). Walk your fingers down your right leg as you bend forward.
- Hold the stretch for 15–20 seconds.
- After you've stretched your right leg, repeat this stretch on your left.



Calves

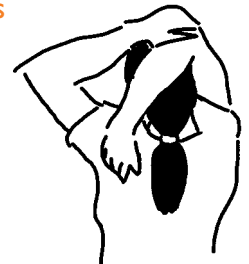
- Stand with your left foot about six inches from a wall.
- Bend forward so that your forearms and head are resting on the wall.
- Bend your left knee and step back with your right foot so that your right leg is straight.
- Keeping your lower back flat, slowly move your hips forward until you feel the stretch in your right calf. Be sure that your right heel is on the floor as you stretch and that the toes of both feet are pointed straight toward the wall.
- Hold the stretch for 15–20 seconds.
- After you've stretched your right calf, repeat this stretch on your left.



Upper Body Stretches

Triceps and the top of the shoulders

- Extend your arms over your head.
- Bend your right arm behind your head.
- Reach over your head with your left hand and hold your right elbow.
- Slowly and gently pull the elbow across/behind your head.
- Hold this stretch for 15–20 seconds.
- After you've stretched your right arm, repeat this for your left.



Arms, shoulders, and chest

- Interlock your fingers behind your back so that the palms of your hands are facing your back.
- Slowly lift your arms up behind you until you feel the stretch in your arms, shoulders, and chest.
- Be sure to keep your chin up and chest out as you do this stretch.
- Hold the stretch for 15–20 seconds.

