

I recently had the pleasure of holding a 10-day old infant. During my 15 minute “baby fix”, I saw her do normal infant things such as yawning, scrunching her face, and stretching. She stretched her neck a bit, her arms a little, and her legs a lot. She had such a look of peace and comfort after her stretches. It made me wonder... why don't I stretch like she does? Would it make me feel good just like it does her?

The answer, of course, is YES! Physical activity and regular exercise are important to our general health and well-being throughout life. Our bodies do it instinctually as infants and children, but often times, as we reach adulthood and beyond, we let this need our body has fall to the low end of our priority list.

As we age, our inactivity can have greater and greater negative effects. Being physically active can help us continue to do the things we like to do and stay stronger as we approach our senior years. The research regarding the benefits of staying physically active proves that regular physical activity over long periods of time produces many long-term benefits.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that regular physical activity is one of the most important things you can do for your overall health. Being physically active can help you:

- ✓ Control Weight
- ✓ Reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease
- ✓ Reduce your risk for Type 2 diabetes and metabolic syndrome
- ✓ Reduce your risk of certain cancers
- ✓ Strengthen your bones and muscles
- ✓ Improve your mental health and mood
- ✓ Improve your ability to do daily activities and prevent falls, especially in older adults
- ✓ Increase your chances of living longer

Who wouldn't want to reap these benefits? If the benefits are so great, then why are there so many inactive Americans struggling with their general health? One reason is because many people seem to have an aversion for exercise. However, physical activity is not the same as exercise.

Although related in that both exercise and physical activity involves “the voluntary movements that burn calories”, physical activities are any of those activities that get your body moving. They could include walking the dog, gardening, washing windows, walking from a more distant parking spot, golfing, or dancing. Exercise, on the other hand, is a form of physical activity that is specifically designed for a targeted outcome.

It may include such things as weight training, tai chi, or an aerobics class. Exercise is typically a planned and structured activity that is repetitive in nature.

If you enjoy exercise, keep moving! Exercise has the same benefits as physical activity.

However, if your dislike for exercise is what is holding you back from reaping the health benefits, then change your focus to physical activity you enjoy. There are many ways you can choose to be physically active each day. Just as an infant instinctually stretches to make them feel better, an adult needs to find those physical activities that help them feel better, as well.

The keys to improving health through physical activity are to make activity a priority, make it fun, and keep it interesting.

Prioritize: Sometimes life just gets in the way and the intention of being physically active becomes a mere idea rather than a reality. How can we make physical activity a priority, then? Perhaps the best way is to schedule into your calendar. You can make a note to walk with a co-worker during your lunch. You can meet a friend at the park to take your dog for a walk. You can join a bowling team or choose to park farther from your destination. Making a daily intentional decision that you will be more physically active will ensure you are making your health a priority.

Make it Fun: Take a moment to write down ALL the things you like to do that are fun. Try to make the list as exhaustive as possible. For the purposes of focusing on physical activity, cross out any of those things that are sedentary in nature. For example, I like to play cards, but that wouldn't meet my need for being more physically active (although it most certainly has benefits for social and cognitive health!) Once you have refined your list, pick at least two things from your "fun" list to focus on each week. Commit to participating in each activity at least one time that week. Remember that the benefits of being physically active are not just physical in nature. Being active also helps our emotional well-being by improving our mood. Doing something fun a couple of times a week can have positive social benefits, as well. Often times, making it fun will include doing things with family and/or friends.

Keep it Interesting: Change your "fun" activities regularly. By adding this variety, you will keep your weekly physical activity more interesting. For example, ask a friend to go to the zoo with you. If you have young children or grandchildren, they would likely enjoy this outing, as well. Pick two or three local historical sites that you have never toured and make an afternoon outing to enjoy them.

Don't let a negative perception of physical activity limit your ability to achieve or maintain good health. By making it a priority while keeping it fun and interesting, you can reap the positive benefits of being physically active. For more information on striving for better health, contact me at the Geary County Extension Office 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!