Being Skinny is Beside the Point - Exercise to Improve Your Life

By Meagan Wilson

Popular culture places a great deal of emphasis on losing weight and being thin. You can hardly visit any website without seeing some banner advertising a miraculous diet tip or fat-busting exercise move. What you aren't likely to learn from all this hype about fitness is all the other benefits of exercise. Yes, regular physical activity helps your body to use up more of the energy it gets from food, including the energy it may have stored as fat. This generally results in a leaner, "sexier" physique. But toned muscles and a lower body mass index are only two of the **myriad benefits** derived from "working out."

If they are not used, muscles atrophy--shrink and weaken. Your heart is a muscle that works constantly, every day of your life. Exercise, especially the types classified as "cardio," temporarily elevates your **heart** rate and forces your **lungs** to work harder. This in turn strengthens those organs, helping them ward off infections and disease. Though cardiovascular and aerobic exercises such as running, quick walking, using the elliptical at the gym, bicycle riding, etc. temporarily raise your blood pressure, a regular fitness routine helps to stabilize blood pressure at healthy levels. Physical activity increases good cholesterol, or HDL (high-density lipoprotein). Exercise also reduces harmful triglyceride levels, otherwise known as fat. Regular, exercise helps to lower blood pressure and cholesterol, strengthens your respiratory system and improves immune efficiency.

Your heart, lungs and immune system are certainly not the only things that benefit from a good workout. Exercise can be a fantastic way to **manage mental and emotional stress**. Have you ever taken a walk to "cool off" when upset? Moderate physical stress, from a challenging hike or run to a relaxing yoga session, triggers endorphins in your brain. These are the same "feel-good neurotransmitters" released after sex. Even ten or twenty minutes of physical activity can help to clear your head and improve your mood. Regular activity also helps you sleep. Balance your mental tiredness with physical exertion, and you're almost guaranteed to sleep much better.

Back on the subject of endorphins and sex, regular exercise has been shown to **improve sex for both men and women**. For starters, the endorphins released after physical exertions help you to feel better and happier; this can make sexual activity more enjoyable. Also, studies indicate that women are more responsive to sexual stimuli shortly after working out, and that men enjoy more and better sex when they engage in an hour or more of aerobic exercise three or four times per week.

Cardio and aerobic exercise are often considered best for promoting heart health and burning fat, but that doesn't mean they have to be high-impact. A number of exercise disciplines, including Yoga and Pilates, emphasize body-weight exercises and connecting movements to breathe. For many years, the gentle, rhythmic motions of Tai Chi have been used to promote strength, balance, joint health and flexibility. Walking is one of the easiest and most accessible low-impact cardio exercises, and it burns almost exactly half as many calories as running. Swimming and water aerobics are also great options.

Any article on fitness would be remiss without the advice to consult your health care professional before embarking on a new exercise program. You should always keep in mind that the **purpose of your**

workouts is to benefit you--not vice versa. [If you are sick or injured](#), it is best to take time off rather than risk exacerbating the symptoms. You're probably fine exercising with a minor cold, but if you have a fever or more serious illness, it's better to rest. If you experience muscle or joint pain during exercise, it is a sign of injury. Don't try to power through it; give yourself time to recover. This leads to my last point: obsessive exercise, like any other compulsive activity, is unhealthy. Over-exercising can actually damage your muscles, joints and bones and overwork your heart, rather than strengthening your body and improving your health. As a Roman dramatist once wrote, "[Moderation in all things](#)."