

An Introduction to Physical Activity

This handout discusses a Whole Health approach to “Working the Body.” It’s a guide to how you can use this area of self-care to be healthier.

- On page 1, learn how working your body can improve your health and what you can do if you don’t like to exercise.
- On page 2, make it personal - identify what *your* body needs.
- On page 3, learn about complementary integrative approaches to working the body and learn some tips for working your body.
- On page 4, find out where to go for more information.

What if there was one treatment that could prevent and treat dozens of diseases, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and obesity?¹ And what if there were very few side effects of that treatment? Would you do it?

There is such a treatment available! And you can do it yourself, at whatever time works for you, in a way that is enjoyable for you. That treatment is physical activity - working the body.

How may working the body improve my health?

Research studies have found that physical activity does the following:

- Reduces fatigue and helps one sleep better²
- Improves mental health and decreases anxiety and depression³⁻⁵
- Promotes the growth of brain cells and improves the way the brain works⁶⁻⁸
- Helps prevent many long-term health issues, such as⁹⁻¹¹
 - Heart disease
 - Cancer
 - Type 2 diabetes
 - High blood pressure
 - Obesity
 - Dementia
- Slows the aging process¹²
- Lowers the chance of dying early from any cause^{9, 13}
- Increases the length of time one may live¹⁴

Working the body can also help in other specific ways. Some activities increase your stamina. Others improve your strength, or flexibility, or balance. Still others may improve your range of motion (the area a joint can move), or dexterity (ability to use your hands or body). Working your body in these ways can help you to live your life to the fullest and, within reason, be able to do the things you want to do.

What can I do if I don't like to exercise?

Exercise is just one form of working the body. It involves a plan and repetition. These might be things you do at the gym or while working out at home. But working the body includes more than exercise. It is any activity that uses your energy to move the large muscles in your body. Examples are biking, walking, swimming, gardening, yardwork, playing a sport, and actively playing with a child or animal. The list is endless.

What is involved in a Whole Health approach to working my body?

Whole Health focuses on what you need and want. What is important to you? What will help you be able to do what you want to do in life? Mindful awareness is key. "Listen" to your body. (You may want to do a "body scan" practice before you reflect on the questions. Refer to the "body scan" section in the Whole Health handout "[Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living](#).")

Here are some questions to guide you:

- How does your body feel overall? What about each of its parts?
- How much stamina (energy; staying power) do you have?
- How strong are you? How flexible? How is your balance?
- How active are you? Do you do some physical activity most days of the week?
- Do you move some parts of your body, but other parts not so much?
- How do you feel emotionally? Do you think this is tied to how much or how little you move your body?
- Are you able to physically do most things that you would like to do?
- Are you satisfied with the amount of physical activity you get? If not, what gets in the way?
- What physical activities do you enjoy? What new ones would you like to try?
- What do you think your body needs right now?

What are the next steps after listening to my body?

The next step is to develop a plan for working your body. Use the awareness you gained to help you. For success, set a goal that is 1) doable for you, 2) specific, and 3) one you want to do. For more information on physical activity, reference the Whole Health handout "[Get Moving: Adding Physical Activity into Your Routine](#)."

There are many people in the community who can help you develop a plan and stick to it. You can talk to your primary care provider and other members of your health care team, physical therapists, exercise physiologists, recreation therapists, personal trainers, class instructors, and others.

Continue to use mindful awareness as you work your body. How does your body feel? Are you reaching your goal? Are you seeing benefits? Change your goal over time as needed.

What is a good way to set a goal?

Consider writing a SMART goal. SMART stands for

- **Specific:** what exactly will you do?
- **Measurable:** how much and how often will you do it?
- **Action-oriented:** what action will you take?

- **Realistic:** is this a goal you can achieve?
- **Timed:** when will you start and when will you end?

Also, ask yourself the following questions:

- Where will you do it?
- What might get in the way of accomplishing your plan? How will you work around that difficulty?
- Will this activity be fun?
- Is it something you really want to do?

How much physical activity should I do?

This is personal and will vary depending on how healthy you are and your abilities. Again, use mindful awareness to help you decide if you are doing too much, too little, or the right amount of exercise for you. In general, many guidelines recommend doing no less than 150 minutes (2½ hours) per week.¹⁵ More hours per week will help more.

What are some complementary integrative ways I can work my body?

The following practices are known to promote health:

Yoga

Yoga is an ancient practice that is becoming popular in the United States. It involves physical activity--postures (called asanas). But it is more than that. It also focuses on breathing and relaxation or meditation. Yoga can help a person find a more balanced and peaceful state of mind and body. For more information on yoga, refer to the Whole Health handout "[An Introduction to Yoga for Whole Health.](#)"

Tai chi/Qigong

Tai chi (pronounced ty-chee) is an ancient Chinese martial art. It involves slow graceful gestures and flowing movements. The exercises help clear the mind and lead to feelings of peace.

Qi gong (pronounced chee-gung) is a practice similar to tai chi. Some people consider tai chi a form of qi gong. Qi gong means "cultivation of vital energy." Energy is gained through body posture, breathing, and mental attention.

For more information on tai chi and qi gong, refer to the Whole Health handout, "[An Introduction to Tai Chi and Qi Gong.](#)"

Pilates, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, and Trager

These are four other approaches to help you work your body. They can help you become more aware of how your body moves. They decrease muscle tension, help your body move easier, and help to avoid injury. They are often used by athletes and dancers. They also can be helpful to people looking for new ways to move their bodies. They can all be taught in groups or individually. To find someone who works with these approaches, you could contact a physical therapist or exercise physiologist at a VA Center or elsewhere in your community.

What are some other tips for working the body that might help me?

- **Watch how much you are inactive.** Even if you work your body each day, you may not be as healthy as you could be if you spend most of the day not moving. Try to find ways to move throughout the day.
- **Every bit counts.** Any activity is better than none. Even a few minutes a day may help.
- **Prevent injury.** In general, you are much more likely to benefit from physical activity than be harmed. But it is important to pay attention to safety. The United States Army has found that a high number of injuries occur during military physical training and exercise.¹⁶ The following tips can help you avoid injury:
 - Check with your health care team before you start a new physical activity.
 - Start slowly and build up gradually. Pace yourself.
 - Practice activities such as yoga, tai chi, and qi gong under the guidance of a qualified teacher.
 - Be aware of what your body is telling you when you are active.

For you to consider:

- Do you want to work your body to improve your health? If yes, what specifically do you want to improve? (Disease prevention? Stamina? Sleep? Mental health? Strength? Flexibility? Balance? Range of motion? Dexterity? Something else?)
- What is the first goal you will focus on?
- What will you do to help prevent injury?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Go4Life program from the National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health	Exercises, activity logs, tips, tools, and more	https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/how-older-adults-can-get-started-exercise

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Charlene Luchterhand MSSW, Education and Research Coordinator, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on two documents for clinicians: 1) Working Your Body, an overview written by Surya Pierce, MD, ABIHM, RYT and 2) Passport to Whole Health: A Personal Health Planning Reference Manual written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD.

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