Beginning to exercise and out of breath! [1]

Dear Alice,

I've been trying to add a little exercise to my routine this spring – some biking, rollerblading, and a little running mostly – but I'm finding that it doesn't take very long for me to be completely out of breath and miserable. The last thing I want to do is give up, since I haven't been too active this winter and don't want to completely vegetate this summer. Will I build some endurance by just doing more of what I've been doing, or am I bound to be gasping for air whenever I try to have some fun outdoors?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Slow down, but don't give up! Biking, rollerblading, and running are excellent forms of exercise for cardiovascular fitness, improving coordination, and strengthening muscles in your body, especially in your legs. Given that you are just starting out a new exercise routine, you may want to speak with your health care provider. S/he may be able to provide you with a healthy way to start getting in shape based on your fitness level and personal health history.

First things first, figuring out an approximate training intensity, or cardiovascular training zone, is a good place to start. Each individual has an optimal level at which they can exercise that allows the best use of oxygen and energy. Starting out at the level that is right for you will help you build your endurance. The following formula will help you determine your training intensity level:

1. Estimate your maximal heart rate (MHR) by subtracting your age from 220. For example, if you are 25 years old, your MHR is 195.
2. To figure out your lower limit, multiply your MHR 65%. For example, if your MHR is 195, your lower limit is 195 x 0.65, or 127 beats per minute.
3. To establish your upper limit, multiply your MHR by 85%. For example, if your MHR is 195, your upper limit is 195 x 0.85, or 166 beats per minute.

When you first begin to exercise, this intensity level will be fairly low. Working out at a higher level could leave you worn out and gasping for air. If working at the 65% level is too strenuous for you to sustain for 20 minutes, begin by working at the 50% level. After a few weeks, when you feel that your endurance and strength have increased, you can increase your training intensity. The goal is to exercise between 65 - 85% of your maximum heart rate. Be aware that as your heart strengthens, it takes less of an effort for it to pump blood to your lungs and
tissue throughout your body. Believe it or not, exercise will become easier! You now will be able to increase either the duration or intensity of your workout.

Now that you know your training intensity, in terms of heart rate, you now have a gauge that helps you monitor how hard you are exercising. About twenty minutes into your workout, stop and take your pulse for 15 seconds (after 15 seconds your heart rate begins to drop), and multiply the number of beats by four. If you are in your target zone, keep going at the pace you were at. If you are above or below, then you know to either decrease or increase the intensity level of your exercising. After a while it will either become second nature to you, or you will begin to know your body and be able to estimate the right intensity level for you. These assessments will help you exercise longer before feeling tired, and you will get a much better workout.

It also helps to stretch and slowly warm up before exercising and not to overdo it in terms of the duration and frequency of workouts. Start out with 20 to 30 minute sessions, working slowly up to a longer workout (if you wish to do so). Don't try to get a really intense workout every day of the week - this could lead to burnout. Try to exercise about three to five times a week, and vary the intensity or type of activity. If you smoke, cutting down or stopping will help significantly to increase lung capacity. Also, speaking with a health care provider before you change your exercise routine is always a good idea. S/he may be able to provide you with a healthy way to start getting in shape based on your fitness level.

Now that you've read up on exercise, get ready for takeoff! Set reasonable goals for yourself, (for example, exercise three times a week for 30 minutes). If you are not as "in-shape" as you want to be this summer, make it your goal to reach that level next summer, and stay active all year long. Remember to take it slowly - a good base for fitness can be maintained for the rest of your life.

Alice!

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