Dear Alice,

I know there are video games out there now that require you to move more, unlike traditional video games. Are these games, like Wii Fit, a good way to be more active or are they doing more harm than good?

Thanks,
Gaming for Exercise

Answer

Dear Gaming for Exercise,

Many people find it difficult to meet the physical activity recommendations, a trend that some associate with increased reliance on technology — such as video games. Nevertheless, using exercise video games, or exergaming, has become popular among those seeking to increase their physical activity in an enjoyable and interactive way. Like any activity that requires you to move and get your heart pumping, exergaming may provide cardiovascular benefits and burn calories, especially when compared to playing traditional video games that require little to no movement. Although exergaming may be a fun way to get moving, experts don’t recommend using active video games as a replacement for other forms of physical activity.

There are a plethora of types and brands of exergames, ranging from ones that simulate being a member of a sports team to having users practice yoga and dance. Ultimately, some are better than others at encouraging aerobic activity and increasing motivation. The most effective exergames are those that combine strenuous physical activity with entertaining gameplay. Select games can even target specific muscle groups or regions of the body based on a person’s preference or need.

Although exergaming won’t likely take the place of other methods of movement, it does have some benefits. For example, it may be an enjoyable way to be physically active, especially for those who struggle to stay motivated. Because these games are offered through popular brand-name video game consoles and handheld devices such as smart phones, they’re frequently accessible, may be played anytime and anywhere, and can reach specific populations who may
have difficulty engaging in physical activity. In fact, research shows that children and teenagers who struggle to reach their recommended amount of daily physical activity may improve their health through exergaming interventions. Another study shows that adults over the age of 65 who use active video games may exhibit improvements in their balance and mobility.

Experts also note that exergaming has its drawbacks. First of all, the games vary in intensity and duration of physical activity, a person’s level of engagement, as well as the parts of the body a person activates and moves. If a person chooses to engage in low-intensity activity, participate for a short period of time, or play a game that only requires the use of one body part, they may not be reaping the benefits made possible by more intense and longer activity. Studies also show that it’s common for participants to drop out of exergaming interventions, which may indicate that it’s not providing the level of engagement and motivation that was initially intended. Additionally, there are concerns that exergaming may increase screen time, which may also contribute to sleep issues and obesity. There’s also the potential that those who initially express interest in exergaming may eventually gravitate towards video games that require less or no physical activity.

Exergames are continuing to be developed and refined. In fact, a U.S. patent was issued for a video game that includes sensors for users to wear to monitor their heart-rate and other biometrics. This development may allow for more accurate, targeted feedback for users, which allows them to adjust their workouts accordingly. However, it’s worth noting that such developments are costly and take time. Though exergames aren’t a substitute for other forms of physical activity, they’re a good addition to other activity. If you’re planning to engage in a rigorous exercise regimen or have more questions, consider speaking with a health care provider to explore your options. In addition to evaluating your health and fitness, they may provide you with more detailed information about how to develop a safe and effective physical activity program that meets your specific needs.

Game on!

Alice!

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