Greetings Alice,

I'm a 36-year-old smoker who gets very little exercise but wants to change his ways. I had a full physical a couple of months ago and got a clean bill. Going to the gym with my older, sort of soft bod is going to be tough enough; I don't want to end up on the floor clutching my heart. Should I see a doc before I hit the gym?

— Tired of saying "I used to swim in college"

Answer

Dear Tired of saying "I used to swim in college",

Kudos to you for taking the initiative to get active! Physical activity is a great way to boost your fitness at any age. Before you get moving, it might help to think about your fitness goals and the safest and healthiest way of getting there. You mention that you recently had a full physical exam, so you may have knowledge of your health status. However, if you’re concerned about whether any underlying health concerns or smoking may impact your physical activity regimen, you might find it helpful to talk with a medical provider. They may be able to help you outline a physical activity program or at least provide you with some considerations as you get started.

Once you get the green light to get moving, it’s time to establish your action (or better yet, active) plan! The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity on a weekly basis. Moderate intensity is often described as aerobic activity during which you can hold a conversation but may not be able to sing a song. But, since you’re just getting back into the swing of it, an effective physical activity plan may be one that starts off at a slower pace (10 to 15 minutes, twice a week) to get your body reacquainted with increased physical activity. As you feel stronger and have more endurance, you may want to increase the time and intensity of your sweat sessions incrementally. Don’t know what to start with? Some options to consider may include walking at a fast pace or swimming a few laps in the pool. Combining that with a couple of weekly strength training sessions and stretching can help get back into a regular activity routine. If it’s available to you, working with a trainer may be useful to help you get started and find a routine that works for your body and fitness level.
You also mention that you’re a smoker. It's worth noting that smoking may impact your ability to reach your fitness goals. Generally speaking, smoking impairs a person’s endurance and is correlated with poorer physical performance. Why you ask? Smoking makes it more difficult for your heart, lungs, and muscles to get all the oxygen-rich blood they need to perform well. Smoking also increases your heart rate while at rest. Any additional activity may put added stress on your heart, which is why it’s key to talk with your health care provider about the impact smoking may have on your physical activity regimen. The good news is that if you’re hoping to quit, there are a lot of resources available. Your school, workplace, or local health department may have smoking cessation services or integrated programs in which you can enroll. Additionally, Smokefree.gov [3] is a national resource that can help you locate even more information on quitting. It’s also worth noting that physical activity has been used as part of cessation plans to help reduce cravings, manage withdrawal symptoms, and reduce stress.

With some support from your health care provider and a little motivation, you’ll be on your way to a more active and healthy self. Here’s to many happy and healthy workouts in your future!

Alice!
Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity [4]
Fitness [5]
Safety & Injury Prevention [6]

Related questions

Beginning to exercise and out of breath! [7]
Order of workout routines to maximize benefits [8]
Smoking withdrawal symptoms [9]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [10]
Tobacco Cessation (Morningside) [11]
Dodge Fitness Center (Morningside) [12]
Medical Services (CUIMC) [13]
Addiction Information & Management Strategies (AIMS) (CUIMC) [14]
Bard Athletic Center (CUIMC) [15]

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