Cardio Basics

With 61% of Americans considered overweight or obese, it's clear that many of us are not following the latest fitness guidelines that prescribe an hour of exercise a day. In fact, there was no doubt a collective groan when people realized they would now have to find an hour each day to do something they can't seem to find 5 minutes for. How important are these guidelines and what can you do to make them fit into your life?

The Simple Facts About Cardio

Cardiovascular exercise simply means that you're involved in an activity that raises your heart rate to a level where you're working, but can still talk (aka, in your Target Heart Rate Zone). Here's why cardio is so important:

- It's one way to burn calories and help you lose weight
- It makes your heart strong so that it doesn't have to work as hard to pump blood
- It increases your lung capacity
- It helps reduce risk of heart attack, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes
- It makes you feel good
- It helps you sleep better
- It helps reduce stress
- I could go on all day, but you get the point

Cardio for Better Quality of Life

Appearance is important. That's why I take a shower every day, make sure my clothes match and check that I don't have anything green stuck in my teeth. But I worry that we've gotten so obsessed with how we look that we no longer care about how we *feel*. If you look at the benefits listed above, all of them translate into feeling good now and in the future. Despite that, we still seem more entranced with getting six-pack abs than feeling good, both physically and mentally.

Have we forgotten that being active can make our lives better? Moving around increases blood flow to our muscles, strengthens the heart and lungs and teaches the heart to work more efficiently. Not only that, when you exercise you set a good example for your kids to do the same, which could mean a better future for them.

If all this is true, why isn't that enough to get us moving? Why do so many of us struggle with being active? Part of it might be how we think about ourselves, our bodies and exercise.

How to Begin

- Choose an activity that you enjoy. The best exercise for you is the one you'll actually do! Walking is a great place to start since it doesn't require special equipment and you can do it anywhere.
- Start with 2 or 3 days of your chosen activity with a rest day between workouts.
- Begin with a 5-10 minute warm up of light cardio and stretch the muscles you'll use during your workout.
- Increase your pace and intensity to slightly harder than comfortable and exercise as long as you can.
- End each workout with a 5-minute cool down of light cardio and stretch the muscles you've worked to help keep your muscles flexible and reduce your chances of injury.
- Each week, increase your workout time by a few minutes until you can work continuously for 30 minutes a session.
- Don't worry about distance or pace. For the first few weeks, focus on endurance and conditioning. You have plenty of time to work on your speed and distance!
- After 6 or more weeks, change your routine by adding another day of exercise, increasing your pace/intensity, adding a new activity and/or increasing the amount of time you exercise.

Begin where you ARE, not where you want to be. You may only be able to exercise for a few minutes at a time, but that will change quickly if you're consistent.

Tips for Better Workouts

- Make sure you have quality shoes for your chosen activity.
- Start slowly. Doing too much too soon can lead to injuries and misery.
- Try new activities. Doing the same thing can lead to plateaus, boredom and injuries.
- Be ready for exercise by feeding your body regularly throughout the day and by staying hydrated.
- Always stretch both after you warm up *and* after your workout!
- If you're sore or tired, give yourself extra recovery days if needed.