



Fitness and Your 13- to 18-Year-Old

Kids who enjoy sports and exercise tend to stay active throughout their lives.

Immediate benefits include maintaining a healthy weight, feeling more energetic, and promoting a better outlook. Participating in team and individual sports can boost self-confidence, provide opportunities for social interaction, and offer a chance to have fun. And regular physical activity can help prevent heart disease, diabetes, and other medical problems later in life.

Fitness in the Teen Years

It's recommended that teens get at least 1 hour of physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week. Yet physical activity tends to decline during the teen years. Many teens drop out of organized sports and participation in daily physical education classes is a thing of the past.

But given the opportunity and interest, teens can reap health benefits from almost any activity they enjoy, from skateboarding, in-line skating, yoga, swimming, dancing, or kicking a footbag in the driveway. Weight training, under supervision of a qualified adult, can improve strength and help prevent sports injuries.

Teens can work physical activity into everyday routines, such as walking to school, doing chores, or finding an active part-time job. They can take be camp counselors, babysitters, or assistant coaches for young sports teams, jobs that come with a chance to be active.

Motivating Teens to Be Active

Teens face many new social and academic pressures in addition to dealing with emotional and physical changes. Studies show that teens on average spend more than 6 hours a day on various media, including watching TV, listening to music, surfing online, and playing video games. It's not surprising that teens can't seem to find the time to exercise and many parents can't motivate them to be active.

Parents should try to give teens control over how they decide to be physically active. Teens are defining themselves as individuals and want the power to make their own decisions, so they're reluctant to do yet another thing they're told to do. Emphasize that it's not *what* they do; they just need to be physically active regularly.

Once they get started, many teens enjoy the feeling of well-being, reduced stress, and increased strength and energy they get from exercise, and then might gravitate to exercise without nudging from a parent.

To keep teens motivated the activities have to be fun. Support your teen's choices by providing equipment, transportation, and companionship. Peers can play an influential role in teens' lives, so create opportunities for them to be active with their friends.

Help your teen stay active by finding an exercise regimen that fits with his or her schedule. Your

teen may not have time to play a team sport at school or in a local league, but many gyms offer teen memberships, and kids may be able to squeeze in a visit before or after school. Your teen might also feel more comfortable doing home exercise videos. If transportation is an obstacle, try coordinating your teen's exercise schedule with your own.

And all teens should limit the time spent in sedentary activities, including watching TV and using the computer.

When to Speak With Your Doctor

If you're concerned about your teen's fitness, speak with your doctor. Teens who are overweight or very sedentary may need to start slowly and the doctor may be able to recommend programs or help you devise a fitness plan.

A teen with a chronic health condition or disability should not be excluded from fitness activities. Some activities may need to be modified or adapted, and some may be too risky. Consult your doctor about which activities are safe.

And some teens may overdo it when it comes to fitness. Young athletes, particularly those involved in gymnastics, wrestling, or dance, may face pressures to lose weight. If your teen refuses to eat certain food groups (such as fats), becomes overly concerned with body image, appears to be exercising compulsively, or experiences a sudden change in weight, talk with your doctor.

Another dangerous issue is the use of steroids, particularly in sports where size and strength are valued. Talk with your doctor if you suspect your teen is using steroids or other performance-enhancing substances.

Finally, speak with your doctor if your teen complains of pain during sports and exercise.

Fitness for Everyone

Everyone can benefit from being physically fit. Staying fit can help improve self-esteem and decrease the risk of serious illnesses (such as heart disease and stroke) later in life. In addition, regular physical activity can help teens learn to meet physical and emotional challenges they face every day.

Help your teen commit to fitness by being a positive role model and exercising regularly, too. For fitness activities you can enjoy together, try bike rides, hitting a tennis ball around, going to a local swimming pool, or even playing games like capture the flag and touch football. Not only are you working together to reach your fitness goals, it's a great opportunity to stay connected with your teen.

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