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 make a healthy lifestyle change! Exercise is a great way to boost your fitness at any age, but before your hit the ground (or treadmill) running, there are a few things you may want to consider. Having a conversation with a health care provider is recommended if you haven?t exercised for some time and/or if you have health concerns. Also, before starting an exercise regime it may be helpful to ask yourself if two of more of the guidelines from the American College of Sports Medicine [2] apply to you:

- Do you have a family history of heart disease before age 55 in men and age 65 in women?
- Do you smoke or you quit smoking in the past six months?
- Have you skipped exercising for at least 30 minutes, three days a week for three months or more?
- Are you overweight or obese?
- Do you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol?
- Do you have impaired glucose tolerance, also called prediabetes?

You mention that you recently had a full physical exam recently, so you may have knowledge of your health status. However, if you still need help answering some of these questions or know that you have multiple health concerns, a medical consultation prior to hitting the gym may be helpful. Working with your health care provider will help you safely set out on an exercise program that's right for you? consider it your first step (pun intended!) on your path to physical fitness.

Once you get the green light to get moving, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [3] recommend getting in about 150 minutes of moderate intensity [4] activity on a weekly
basis. But, since you're just getting back into the swing of things, an effective exercise 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 can 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 hopping in the pool for some water aerobics. Combining that, with a couple of weekly strength training sessions [5] will help get you back in tip top shape. It's also common to start off strong but eventually encounter difficulty sticking to an exercise plan, so if you run into this issue you might want to check out exercise motivation... for stress reduction [6] in the Go Ask Alice! archives for a list of tips to ramp up your motivation and keep you goin?.

You also mention that you are a smoker. It's worth noting that smoking may impact your ability to reach your fitness goals. People who smoke tend have less endurance, poorer physical performance, and increased rates of injury and complications from physical activity. Why you ask? Smoking prevents your heart, lungs and muscles from getting all the oxygen-rich blood they need to perform well. A number of physical endurance studies note that smokers reach exhaustion quicker and can't run as far as non-smokers. These studies also found that smokers get fewer benefits from physical training and have less muscular strength and flexibility. As such, if you do decide you want to quit, it might be helpful to know that there are a number of resources that can help you ditch tobacco. Your school, workplace, or local health department may have smoking cessation services and/or integrated programs. Additionally, smokefree.gov [7] is a national resource that can help you locate even more information on quitting.

With the oversight of your health care provider and a little stick-to-it-iveness, 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 [8]
Fitness [9]
Safety & Injury Prevention [10]

Related questions

Fitting exercise into a busy schedule [12]
Swimming: Good for weight loss? [13]
Smoking withdrawal symptoms and how to quit [14]
Weight gain and quitting smoking [15]
CU Move ? Columbia's physical activity program [16]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [17]
Tobacco Cessation (Morningside) [18]
Medical Services (CUMC) [19]
Addiction Information & Management Strategies (AIMS) (CUMC) [20]
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