

**- Heart / Exercise**

## How to improve your cardiovascular health without even breaking a sweat

Working on your heart health can be easier than you think and doesn't necessarily have to involve strenuous exercise, experts tell Suzanne Harrington

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You hate the gym. Or you haven't time for the gym, live too far from the gym or you can't afford the gym. Or all of the above. However, you're not daft — you know you need to up your cardio fitness, but can't abide all that protein-shake, personal-best, lycra-wearing culture — you just want to get a bit fitter.

“High levels of fitness are one of the best markers for longevity but you don't need a gym membership to get there,” says Dr Paddy Barrett, consultant cardiologist at the Blackrock Clinic and at [www.myhearthealth.ie](http://www.myhearthealth.ie).

“What matters most is movement. Just move more. Even just getting more than 7,000 steps every day is linked to a 50% reduction in the risk of dying from any cause over the following decade. For the majority of people, just walking more will make a huge difference. You don't have to run a marathon. You just have to get outside.”

Remind me again why should we move more

“Heart-related conditions remain one of the leading causes of death in Ireland,” says Dr Gráinne Hayes, Assistant Professor in Exercise Physiology at the University of Limerick.

“While the benefits of regular physical activity are immense — improving heart health, reducing risks of cancer and chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, and enhancing mood and sleep — many people struggle to meet recommended activity levels.”

The recommended amount of moderate-intensity exercise is 2.5 to five hours a week, but only 46% of Irish adults do this. Instead, we spend an average 7.7 to 11.5 hours a day sitting — almost half of our waking lives.

“Prolonged, uninterrupted sitting has been strongly linked to higher rates of cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes and even certain cancers like colon and breast cancer,” says Dr Hayes.

“This issue is particularly pressing for older adults (65+), who not only spend the most time sitting but are at the highest risk for cardiovascular disease.”

How best to move?

“Improving cardiovascular health doesn't always require intense exercise,” says Liam Moffatt, chair of the Chartered Physiotherapists in Sport and Exercise Medicine (CPSEM), a clinical interest group of the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists.

“Low-impact activities like brisk walking, swimming, or cycling at a moderate pace can effectively boost cardiovascular health.

“Additionally, practices like body weight resistance training (calisthenics) can be beneficial to provide muscular activation to support the body's joints, linking simultaneously with activities that enhance cardiovascular function.

“The World Health Organisation recommends 150 to 300 minutes of exercise per week for health and wellbeing. Simply put, aiming for 30 minutes of daily exercise to work the heart,

without excessive strain, and incorporating lifestyle changes, like taking the stairs instead of the elevator or walking short distances rather than driving, also support heart health.

“To complement exposure to exercise, it’s wise to set targets and consider if any injury risks are present which may impede your progress. A musculoskeletal review with a Chartered Physiotherapist may be helpful and should be aligned with your preferred form of exercise.”

Make the exercise something you enjoy

“The reality is that there are no instant fixes, just as pills are not an antidote to inactivity, stress, poor sleep, or bad diet,” says Professor Robert Kelly, consultant cardiology and lifestyle medicine physician at the UCD Beacon Hospital and author of *The Heart Book: Making Positive Changes For A Healthy & Happier Life*.

“The crucial thing is that you have to want to do it, whatever it is. And then you have to commit to it. To have a plan.

“Start small — if you’re going to walk, aim for ‘To complement exposure to exercise, it’s wise to set targets and consider if any injury risks’ one kilometre a day. Half a kilometre if one kilometre is too much.

“To make it habitual, you must enjoy what you’re doing, so pick something you like — if you are not a walker, pick something else.

“When you’ve finished whatever you decided to do, give yourself a celebration — high five yourself, congratulate yourself, because you did it.”

This mini celebration will reinforce the new behaviour and associate it with positive feelings, which will in turn motivate you to repeat this behaviour again, so that it becomes a habit.

“Put your runners by the door,” he says.

Be accountable

An accountability partner can be a member of your household, or a friend who can message you or call you. Not to harangue you, shame you, nag you, badger you — simply to ask a preagreed daily question.

“They can ask you, are you going for your walk today? That’s all they need to do,” says Professor Kelly. “Then track it. If you didn’t do the activity, also track it. By using accountability and tracking, your chances of success increase by around 80%.”

Visualise yourself as what you want to be, not what you want to do.

“It’s about perceiving your identity as something — ‘I am a runner’, rather than ‘I am going to run 10km’,” says Professor Kelly. “When you get your mindset right, it works.

“It shouldn’t be all or nothing, but a staged plan, rather than a difficult task — we tend to break New Year resolutions within 21 days. Instead, make it doable.”