

Off the Couch and Active: When to see a Physician Before Exercising

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) and the American Heart Association recommend that all adults participate in 30 minutes a day of moderate-intensity physical activity at least 5 days per week. Those who are cautious about their health may have questions such as “Do I need to see a doctor before I begin exercising?” or “Is it safe?”

ACSM offers the following advice, adapted from *ACSM’s Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription*, 7th ed. *Guidelines* and other resources are available at www.acsm.org.

1. When is it appropriate to see a physician before beginning an exercise program?

An extensive medical work-up is not necessary for many people who wish to begin an exercise or physical activity program. This is particularly true if the program is of light-to-moderate intensity.

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends a risk-stratification approach to exercise participation. The level of risk corresponds to the number of heart disease risk factors a person may have. These factors (high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol levels, family history of heart disease, smoking habit, obesity, and abnormal glucose tolerance) may indicate danger in beginning an exercise program. As a minimum, adults who are to begin an exercise program should begin with a self-administered assessment using a popular questionnaire such as the Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire (see simple version below). Such a questionnaire is easy to use and helpful in determining one’s suitability to safely begin an exercise program. Results from the self-assessment will suggest whether medical clearance would be useful and/or necessary prior to beginning an exercise program.

Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire

1. Has your doctor ever said that you have a heart condition and that you should only do physical activity recommended by a doctor?
2. Do you feel pain in your chest when you do physical activity?
3. In the past month, have you had chest pain when you were not doing physical activity?
4. Do you lose your balance because of dizziness or do you ever lose consciousness?
5. Do you have a bone or joint problem (for example, back, knee or hip) that could be made worse by a change in your physical activity?
6. Is your doctor currently prescribing drugs (for example, water pills) for your blood pressure or heart condition?
7. Do you know of any other reason why you should not do physical activity?

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, see your doctor before you start becoming much more physically active or before you have a fitness appraisal.



2. Does type of exercise play a factor?

People beginning an exercise program should begin with light-to-moderate intensity and gradually increase to personal preference. The minimal goal should be 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity five days per week. Risk stratification recommendations apply to people beginning an exercise program.

3. Is this related to high blood pressure or other diseases?

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is a dangerous condition when left untreated. A regular exercise program can help lower blood pressure in the long run. However, untreated high blood pressure may actually be aggravated by exercise and therefore is an exception to the risk stratification approach. Therefore, ACSM recommends that people with a personal history of high blood pressure see their physician for a complete medical evaluation before beginning an exercise program. Your doctor will know what additional tests may be necessary.

4. What about the age or gender of the person?

Age and gender are two of the factors that increase a person's risk for heart disease. Women who are 55 years of age and older and men who are 45 years of age and older are generally thought to be at higher risk and may need to seek the advice of a physician before beginning an exercise program. The self-assessment questionnaires will help determine that.

5. When is it ok NOT to see a physician first?

It is important to make it as easy as possible for inactive people to become active, but it is also important to make sure that people who need to become more active do so safely. If the results of the self-administered questionnaires do not indicate a need to see a physician, it is ok to begin to improve your health by working toward the 30-minute daily goal.

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