Health Care Providers:
Talk to Your Patients About Physical Activity

As a health care provider, you know it's important to help your patients get more physical activity. But it can be challenging to motivate patients in the short time you spend together.

The second edition of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans offers evidence-based physical activity guidance that can make your job easier. Share the recommendations with your patients and inspire them to get more active.

Start the conversation.

When you bring up physical activity with your patients, it helps to keep the tone friendly and encouraging. Try these quick conversation starters.

How much physical activity do you get in an average week?
Meet your patients where they are. Once you have an idea of their current activity level, you can suggest small changes to help them get more active.

What are some things your family likes to do together?
Does family time mean watching TV on the couch? Offer tips for getting the whole family more active, like turning commercials into family fitness breaks.

Are there activities you'd like to be able to do?
Do your patients want to run a 5K? Climb stairs more easily? Pick up grandkids without pain? Knowing their motivations can help you work together to set achievable goals.

Recommend the right dose of activity.

You can tailor these recommendations for children and adults to match your patients' specific needs, interests, and abilities.

Adults

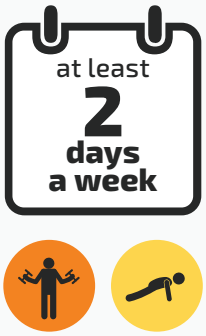
Moderate-intensity aerobic activity*

Anything that gets their heart beating faster counts.

AND

Muscle-strengthening activity

Activities that make their muscles work harder than usual count.



* If they prefer vigorous-intensity aerobic activity (like running), they can aim for at least **75 minutes a week**.

Older adults, pregnant women, and people with a disability or injury need the same amount. But if they can't do 150, encourage them to move as much as they can.

Kids and teens ages 6 to 17

Encourage them to aim for at least 60 minutes every day.

Most of it can be **moderate-intensity aerobic activity**. At least 3 days a week, encourage them to step it up to **vigorous intensity**.

As part of their daily 60 minutes, kids and teens also need:

Muscle-strengthening activity
at least 3 days a week

Anything that makes their muscles work harder counts — like climbing or swinging on the monkey bars.

AND

Bone-strengthening activity
at least 3 days a week

Bones need **pressure** to get stronger. Running, jumping, and other weight-bearing activities all count.

Make it a prescription.

To really drive the message home, frame the recommended dose of physical activity as a prescription. Your patients may take it more seriously.

Focus on the benefits.

The long-term benefits of physical activity are huge, but patients have heard them all before. Sharing messages about the lesser-known immediate benefits can help spark their interest.

Physical activity can make daily life better.

- Improves mood, focus, and sleep
- Helps you feel more energized, calm, and confident
- Makes it easier to do everyday activities, like carrying groceries and playing with kids

Be ready to address barriers.

Changing behavior is hard. And fitting in regular physical activity can be a struggle for all of us. Find out what's holding your patients back and talk about possible solutions. These strategies can help your patients find ways to overcome common barriers.

"I'm just too busy for physical activity."

If they're short on time, could they start with just a few minutes? Even that amount has health benefits, and some activity is always better than none. Suggest taking the stairs at work, parking farther away when shopping, or taking a quick walk after dinner.

"I'm too tired to exercise."

It may sound counterintuitive to your patients, but getting more physical activity can actually boost energy and help them feel less tired. Encourage manageable changes to daily routines and help them set goals to add more activity gradually over time.

"I can't afford a gym membership."

Getting active doesn't mean your patients have to pay for a gym membership or special equipment. Suggest walking for aerobic activity and bodyweight exercises for muscle strength.

"I just don't enjoy exercise."

Lots of things count as physical activity — even things we all have to do anyway. Do they vacuum their apartment? Walk the dog? Weed the garden? Those activities count, and it all adds up.

"I have an illness, disability, or injury."

Being active can actually help manage common conditions like diabetes, depression, and arthritis. And it's possible to adapt many physical activities for people with disabilities and health conditions. The National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD) has helpful guidance: nchpad.org/Articles/7/Disability~Condition

Find resources for your patients.

This fact sheet is just for providers, but the Move Your Way® campaign has lots of tools and materials you can share with patients:

- Fact sheet, posters, and other resources: odphp.health.gov/MoveYourWay/Campaign
- Activity planner for adults to set personalized activity goals: odphp.health.gov/MoveYourWay/Activity-Planner
- Interactive graphic for parents to help their kids get more physical activity: odphp.health.gov/MoveYourWay/Get-Kids-Active

Try displaying Move Your Way posters in your office so patients get the message about physical activity every time they visit.

OASH Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

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