“I do try to get exercise because I think that’s the only way you’re going to stay healthy. . . . I just think we have to always work hard to stay healthy. I think that’s an ongoing thing. It’s something we need to always work at. Anything worth having is worth working at.”

Female, 50ish

Lifestyle Physical Activity

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010, it is recommended that adults accumulate at least 150 minutes a week or 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most days. Children are encouraged to do 60 minutes.

Multiple health benefits can be achieved by this recommendation, and it may be easier to sustain over time than a more intense goal. While more intense goals are appropriate for a high level of fitness and athletic performance, this recommendation focuses on improved health.

The good news is the minutes can accumulate throughout the day. That means if you get 10 minutes here and 10 minutes there – every minute counts! Aerobic activity should be done in at least 10 minute episodes. If you already get 30 minutes of physical activity daily, you may gain additional health benefits by being more active or by increasing intensity.

What is moderate intensity? Activities of moderate intensity will increase heart rate and breathing to some extent. On a scale relative to a person’s capacity, moderate-intensity activity us usually a 5 or 6 on a 1 to 10 scale. Brisk walking, dancing, swimming, or bicycling on a level terrain are examples. Another marker for moderate intensity is that you can still talk while doing the activity but you can’t sing.

Isn’t it All About Weight Loss?
No! The key to better health is to focus on health and being fit, not on the number on a scale. There are numerous measurements of health. Weight is only one of those factors and may not be the most important one. This IS the good news public health message!

“I would rather spend my money signing up for gym or going rock climbing or skiing or something like that. . . . I don’t go to the doctor much [because] I hardly ever get sick. . . . I’m grateful for the benefits of being physically fit, and you don’t have to be thin to be fit.”

Female, late 20's
With increased physical activity, some people will see a weight gain as fat is converted to lean muscle. Over time, many people find they lose weight and/or inches but more important, they feel better!

Longitudinal studies conducted at the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research in Dallas, Texas, found that fitness level appears to be more important than body fatness relative to the risks for certain diseases. They found that a lack of fitness is the greatest factor for cardiovascular and all-cause mortality – an even higher risk factor than obesity! Also, researchers at the Institute found the best predictor for maintained weight loss is physical activity.

So can a person be fat and fit? Certainly a lean person who is inactive may not be as healthy as a heavier person who is active. The results of the Cooper Institute’s studies led researchers to the following conclusions:

- It appears health benefits from leanness are limited to fit individuals.
- Being fit appears to reduce many of the risks association with being overweight or obese.

"[An inactive lifestyle is] kind of like the story of the frog that’s in the pot. If you turn the heat up fast, he jumps out. . . . He notices the change quickly. But if you turn [the heat] up slowly, he'll stay in and boil. So, a lot of that’s how life is. Your life changes slowly. So if you have an unhealthy habit, . . . you are not going to notice it until you are having problems with your health.”

Male in his 30's

Source for quotations: Holmes, Betty, Suzanne Pelican and Fred Vanden Heede. Let their voices be heard: Quotations from life stories related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image. Laramie, Wyoming: Wellness IN the Rockies, University of Wyoming, 2004. (Used with permission.)