

Can You Get Fit While Reading a Book?

“Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.” –Joseph Addison

At an early age, we were taught to write and read at a rudimentary level. We meticulously formed each letter of the alphabet over and over again until we became proficient enough to do it during nap time.

We learned that a horizontal line above a vowel gives it a “long” sound, while a u-shaped symbol above denotes a “short” sound. Listening to our parents or teachers read to us was often the highlight of our day. We felt the magic of our imaginations taking flight as stories and characters flickered to life in our mind’s eye.

During elementary school, it was our turn to take books into our own hands. We tackled book reports (my first was on *Frog and Toad Are Friends* by Arnold Lobel), used learning software such as Accelerated Reader that awarded us each time we aced a quiz, and took weekly trips to the library that further emphasized the importance of reading and, in many students, nurtured a swiftly blossoming love for literature.

Middle school and high school turned up the heat with higher-level works that were a far cry from the Beverly Cleary and “Superfudge” books of our easy-going, elementary days. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Great Gatsby*, Homer’s *The Iliad*, and other classics introduced to us the *discipline* of learning. We studied literary and rhetorical devices, dissected Shakespearean sonnets, wrote thousand-word essays, prepared for Socratic seminars, and altogether racked our brains in the pursuit of being well-read and therefore well-rounded and well-educated.

After college, reading is no longer a requirement, and sadly, many of us retire our books to the shelves and turn to the Internet, our TVs, cell phones and other devices to keep our minds occupied outside of work. After more than a decade spent reading for work, “reading for pleasure” somehow seems oxymoronic.

A 2013 HuffPost poll showed that out of 1,000 participants, 28 percent of those surveyed hadn’t read a book in over a year. The follow-up HuffPost article endorsed the undervalued hobby of reading, pointing out a few of its benefits, such as:

- Slowing down Alzheimer’s
- Enhancing your memory
- Expanding your vocabulary (thereby making you an articulate speaker)
- Helping you empathize with other people and cultures

If those reasons aren’t enough to make you pick up a book (or download one to your iPad), consider these impressive health-related reading facts:

Reduces Depression

This year in *PLoS One*, a study was published indicating patients who combined support sessions with reading self-help books showed lower level of depression than patients who only received traditional treatments.

Fights Stress

Reading can also lower stress levels. Researchers with the University of Sussex found that reading was the “most effective way to overcome stress,” more effective than listening to music, having a cup of tea, or going for a walk.

Prevents Mental Decline

Reading can keep you sharp, and not just because you might be acquiring new knowledge in your books. Elderly people who read experienced slower mental decline than those who didn't. It's noteworthy that those who engaged in *infrequent* mental activity exhibited mental decline 48 percent faster than the control group.

Like working out, it may take time for you to find pleasure in reading. It may seem difficult to let the world go quiet and just focus on the rhythm of printed words for a while; you may not even like your selected story at first. But if you keep with it, and you find a genre or author that resonates with you, I can almost guarantee that you will find reading to be a truly rewarding and enjoyable pastime that you greatly look forward to, much like you did when you were young, when neither physical activity nor story time seemed a burden.

"There's so much more to a book than just reading." –Maurice Sendak