

Create a Fitness Program that Works for You

Now is the time to turn your health aspirations into realized goals. But before you get started, make sure you understand the fundamentals when it comes to getting fit.

Many people think that as long as they work on their spiritual relationship they are caring for God's temple. But our **physical bodies**, our **emotions** and our **minds** must be in good **shape**, too.

Besides owing it to ourselves to strive toward a healthier life, we owe it to God. Having good **health** will ensure that our time on Earth is more enjoyable and effective for Him.

Getting **fit** requires that you have some basic knowledge of how your body works. If you are going to achieve your **fitness goals**, you must address all three aspects of your health—cardiovascular capacity, muscle **strength** and **endurance**, and **flexibility**.

Your cardiovascular capacity is simply your ability to take in and process oxygen. The greater the workload on your heart, the more efficient it becomes.

Muscle strength is the ability to handle heavy loads quickly, while muscle endurance is the ability to go the long haul. We need both.

Then we must not forget flexibility. Your ability to stretch out your muscles and allow your body to recover will determine how effective your fitness and overall well-being will be in the future.

We need to exercise in order to live a healthy life. The more you know, the better equipped you will be to succeed in your

program.

CARDIO EXERCISE THAT FITS When your heart is working at top performance, it is providing you with more oxygen, which will give your muscles more strength and your energy system a boost. The greater your capacity to process oxygen and use it, the lower your blood pressure will be because the heart doesn't have to work as hard to get what it needs.

The heart needs workload forced upon it to make it pump harder and push blood throughout the body. Obtaining the health benefits you desire requires that you become knowledgeable about cardio exercise so you can work out properly.

When I train clients or speak to groups, I use the FITS formula to explain the parameters of proper exercise. "FITS" stands for frequency, intensity, time and style. We will explore these guidelines and how they apply to each of the three aspects of fitness.

Frequency Refers to how often you work out. According to Peg Jordan, in her book *Fitness: Theory & Practice*, the Aerobics and Fitness Association of America (AFAA) recommends that you engage in cardio exercise three to five days a week.

If you're working out only three days a week, you probably won't notice any serious changes to your outward appearance. However, you should receive healthy benefits such as reduced chances of heart disease and less illness.

The bottom line here is to ensure you are exercising enough times throughout the week to help your cardio ability (your heart) improve. I do a minimum of four cardio days a week.

Intensity Has to do with how hard you are working when you exercise. If you truly want to be healthy you will need to work at an intensity level that makes doing anything else impossible. Having an intensity level that is too low is probably one of the biggest mistakes people make when working

out.

You can multitask—with little or no health benefits—or you can get serious, put the magazine and cell phone away, and do it right. If you are going to put in the time, make it count.

Time Refers to how long you work out. New AFAA research indicates that we need at least 30 minutes of continuous exercise for it to be effective for our cardiovascular health. And in 2003, the AFAA published new data released by the American Heart Association (AHA) that suggests we require a full hour of cumulative exercise each day in order to receive health benefits for the heart.

Everyday tasks such as walking, gardening and sweeping are certainly good for the cumulative effect, but they aren't intense enough. You will need to ensure that you are balancing both high-intensity exercise and other activities to keep you mobile.

Most fitness classes are one hour in length to guarantee that you are getting a solid 30 minutes of true cardio exercise. When you take into account warm-up, cool-down and stretch, you are left with about 30 to 40 minutes of actual exercise.

Style Has to do with how you exercise. The type of exercise you choose will have the most influence on whether you stick to your program or not.

Personally, I hate the treadmill. Put me outside, though, and I enjoy the challenge of watching traffic, going up hills and actually going someplace. On a treadmill, I hope to last 20 minutes. Outside, I can run 40 minutes or more without giving it a second thought.

You have to find something you enjoy. In my book *Finally FIT! (Siloam)*, I offer advice that will help you find the right style of exercise for your unique temperament and personality.

RESISTANCE TRAINING THAT FITS

I was never a big weightlifting fan until I learned why it was so very important for me to incorporate it into my fitness program. You do it not to be buff but to have strong bones.

Our bones are designed for normal movement, but they need to grow stronger, more dense. This happens only when they're acted on by the muscles pulling on them.

Osteoporosis is a result of weak bones. If you do not have weight-bearing exercise in your life, your bones will be weak.

Calcium is certainly necessary for our bone health, but density comes from resistance training. When we add resistance to our muscles and make them pull harder against the bones, the bones are forced to get thicker and more dense.

Frequency. If you want a maintenance program for healthy bones, doing resistance training one or two times a week is plenty when combined with three to five cardio exercise days. You should allow 48 hours between weight-training days.

Resistance training breaks down the tissue in the muscle so that it can be made stronger. To grow, muscle tissues need to be broken into more pieces (multiplying) so that when they combine, you have more tissue than when you started.

That's why you get sore after you work out, but with a proper cool-down and stretch, you shouldn't truly hurt. If at any time you begin to hurt, stop.

Intensity You don't have to lift hundreds of pounds to get the results you seek, but you do need to lift properly. Ever see someone at the gym just belting out his reps (repetitions) at warp speed?

If he slowed down his reps and lifted properly, he would most likely need to decrease his weights. His muscles would not be strong enough to handle the full load since he's been working

only one phase of the muscle contraction process.

As you lift, the muscle shortens. The “pull” enables you to lift the weight. You are moving against gravity, overcoming it.

But it is typically the “release” of the lift when you have to be most careful of not going too fast. Your muscle will want to let the weight down quickly, but the slower you release it, the more you are working the muscle.

Breathing out on the pull will give you power by releasing oxygen into the muscle. It also slows you down and helps you resist the temptation to pull up quickly. Breathing in on the release provides oxygen to the required part of your body.

Time This is where reps come into play. A rep is the number of times you perform the exercise.

Your fitness goal will determine the number of reps you complete. Those who want to create healthy bones will use lighter weights and will benefit from 12 reps, two times, which equals two “sets.” Someone who wants to build muscle mass and develop muscle definition will lift heavier weights for three sets of 10 reps each.

Style Your temperament will greatly impact the style of weight resistance that will work best for you. Free weights (handheld) are easy to use and can be purchased and used at home. To use weight machines you’ll probably need to join a gym.

However, free weights are more dangerous than weight machines. Weight machines assist you in regulating the pressure and force you to perform the exercise in a certain manner.

With free weights you are required to use more of your core muscles to stabilize yourself than on a machine. If your posture isn’t good when you lift, you could hurt your back. If

you use good form, then you are building core muscle strength, and we all need more of that.

No matter what type of resistance program you select, you need to ensure that you are eating enough protein and drinking plenty of water. Eliminate these, and you could damage your muscles.

STRETCHING THAT FITS Stretching is something we tend to forget in fitness programs, but it is paramount to our overall health and well-being. Let's take stretching through the FITS formula.

Frequency Muscles require more blood during exercise, so the body sends it to whichever muscles are being recruited the most. You need your blood to be dispersed evenly once you have finished to prevent blood clots.

Stretching is what allows your muscles to perform at their best the next time you work out. You should stretch before and after each cardio and muscle workout. I also highly recommend that you add at least one day a week when you stretch for 30 minutes solid.

Intensity Go slowly and work hard when you stretch. Be sure you breathe correctly.

Time You can stretch out in five to 10 minutes. Concentrate on stretching the muscles you know you will be using.

The key to stretching is to "breathe through." Take deep breaths and allow the muscle to release and relax. Over time you will find your flexibility increasing and your performance improving as a result of stretching.

Style Of the different types of stretching, I recommend rhythmic limbering and static stretching.

Rhythmic limbering is warming up the muscles you expect to

utilize in a workout. You are performing the exact movements but with less intensity.

For example: Before an aerobics class, your warm-up should include limbering and static stretches, especially if you are to perform high-power moves such as kickboxing. You should cool-down with limbering moves until the heart rate declines slightly. Then static stretch the lower and upper body as well as the back.

A static stretch is done by holding a position for a few seconds and breathing through. For instance, with a quad stretch, you stand, holding your foot so that your leg is curled behind you. Without bouncing or moving, you stretch the quad muscles out by holding the position for a few seconds and breathing.

Exercise, especially resistance training, makes the muscles tight. Without stretching, over time you will lose flexibility, leaving you susceptible to injury.

Stretching is preventive maintenance. The more mobile you are, the less likely you are to pull a muscle.

In order to live a healthy life, you must include all three pillars of fitness—cardiovascular capacity, muscle strength and endurance, and flexibility—in your weekly regimen. These fundamentals are much more complex than I have indicated, but now you have a good base and can begin customizing a program that works with your goals, personality type and temperament.

Now let's get started! You're on your way to a more active lifestyle and a healthier you.

Lorraine Bossé-Smith is the author of *Finally FIT! (Siloam)*, from which this article is adapted.