As we launch August’s Focus on Health, take a moment to recall what our goal has been for this year. In January, a call was sent: an open invitation issued to engage monthly in a holistic nursing assessment of your own personal wellness. Wellness topics have been explored from several perspectives, offering options for you to contemplate, to research, to explore potential benefits or fallacies, and to present challenges to your current thinking. This author does not intend these pieces to be the ‘final word’ on any topic. The key is that you, the reader, get involved in the activity or topic visited by thinking about it yourself. Evaluate each idea presented and determine what feels like a possibility for you. Expert discussions call for opposing viewpoints and indeed welcome them – honest inquiry recognizes that there is not ‘one truth’ but many viewpoints in obtaining wisdom. Critical thinking is required. This concept, central to all professional nursing practice, will be explored next month as it relates to life-long learning. Now, let us move on - and talk about motion as it relates to our physical health!

Get Moving!

According to the Dietary Guidelines for American 2005 (USDA/HHS, 2005) the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that Americans tend to be relatively inactive. In 2002, 25 percent of adult Americans had not participated in any leisure time physical activities in the previous month, and in 2003, 38 percent of students in grades 9 to 12 reported viewing 3 or more hours of television per day. Regular physical activity and physical fitness make central contributions to one's health, sense of well-being, and maintenance of a healthy body weight. Physical activity is any movement that uses energy. Physical activity includes a wide range of activities from running, jumping, biking, and swimming to jumping rope, dancing, skating and walking, and aids in managing mild to moderate depression and anxiety (CDC, 2007). The CDC describes physical fitness, as opposed to physical activity, as a complex quality related to the ability to perform physical activity. Maintenance of good physical fitness enables one to meet the physical demands of work and leisure comfortably. People with higher levels of physical fitness are also at lower risk of developing chronic disease. Similarly, a sedentary lifestyle increases risk for weight and obesity and many chronic diseases, including coronary artery disease,
hypertension, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and certain types of cancer. Overall, mortality rates from all causes of death are lower in physically active people than in sedentary people.

Experts tell us that one achieves physical fitness by including cardiovascular conditioning, stretching exercises for flexibility, and resistance exercises or calisthenics for muscle strength and endurance. In terms of our physical bodies, movement can be defined as an act of changing location or position. Our bodies are made for movement (think about the physiology of our muscles, joints, ligaments, tendons etc.) and like nutrition, physical activity is essential for good health. For example, weight-bearing exercises (like walking, jogging, weight-lifting) help build stronger bones.

Physical activity is not just limited to working out at the gym or playing sports, it can also be walking, gardening or simply cleaning the house. Physical movement and exercise is a critical component for health and well-being. Be creative!

**Health Benefits of Physical Activity**

Many people exercise to lose weight, tone and strengthen their muscles or simply just to “look fit.” As a nurse, you may know all or many of the significant health benefits of physical activity. Do you intentionally practice any? Regular moderate-level activity can…

- Help build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints
- Lower the risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- Reduce the risk of developing coronary heart disease (CHD)
- Reduce the risk of stroke
- Lower both total blood cholesterol and triglycerides and increases high-density lipoproteins (HDL or the "good" cholesterol)
- Lower the risk of developing high blood pressure
- Help reduce blood pressure in people who already have hypertension
- Reduce the risk of developing colon cancer
- Reduce feelings of depression and anxiety
- Promote psychological well-being and reduce feelings of stress

Major aspects of physical activity include improved:

- aerobic/cardiovascular (endurance),
- anaerobic (speed/strength),
- flexibility,
- coordination, &
- health & vitality

**Holistic Considerations of ‘Mindful Movement’**

While many types of aerobic and anaerobic exercise promote physical and mental well-being, there are specific “schools” of physical activity with a more distinct mind-body approach.
For example:

- Qigong is a Chinese practice using movement, affirmations, ‘breath work’, visualizations, and meditation to improve the flow of “qi” or life force, restore internal harmony, and restore the practitioner’s harmony with nature.
- Tai Chi is a Chinese system of physical exercises that is believed to facilitate the flow of Qi (life force) in the body, promoting good health and vitality. Tai Chi utilizes movements that are Yin Yang opposites: softness and strength, forward and backward, action and calm.
- Yoga is a multidimensional system that includes stretching and strengthening poses, breathing exercises and ethical and meditation practices. It uses body, breath, and senses to reconnect the person with the universe and move emotions and thoughts into tranquility.

According to the University of Minnesota (McCall, 2008), ‘mindful movement’ is an effective way to reduce stress and its physical consequences. In addition, there are specific physical benefits associated with each of these ‘mindful movement’ practices. Research shows yoga, for example, has health benefits including increased strength and flexibility, better balance and coordination, improved reaction times, better lung function, heightened cardiovascular conditioning, and weight loss. Psychological benefits of these movement practices include relaxation, greater composure, better concentration, and improved mood. Scientific studies have found yoga as a useful adjunct to the care of such conditions as asthma, arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome, multiple sclerosis, and heart disease.

**Shaping your Physical Movement Program**

So, where does the rubber meet the road? Practicing what we preach to our patients! Frequently due to time limitation or overzealousness, many people who go to the gym jump onto the treadmill or stair machine and immediately start exercising at full speed. However, this may increase your risk for muscle injuries or soreness, which can then discourage you from exercising again for several days after which you may lose the motivation to exercise. This vicious cycle may be prevented by warming up and stretching properly as well as choosing an intensity level that’s appropriate for your current fitness level. To get the most out of your exercise program, the Centers for Disease Control recommends including all of the following components:

- Warm-up
- Exercise training activities
- Aerobic (for cardiovascular benefit)
- Weight training (to build strength)
- Stretching (for increased flexibility)
- Cool-down
Summing Up Movement Fundamentals

- Engage in regular physical activity and reduce sedentary activities to promote health, psychological well-being, and a healthy body weight.
- To reduce the risk of chronic disease in adulthood: Engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity, above usual activity, at work or home on most days of the week.
- For most people, greater health benefits can be obtained by engaging in physical activity of more vigorous intensity or longer duration.
- To help manage body weight and prevent gradual, unhealthy body weight gain in adulthood: Engage in approximately 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity activity on most days of the week while not exceeding caloric intake requirements.
- Consider the personal benefits of the ‘mindful movement’ approach and incorporate a program with these aspects into your program.

Any Cautions?

Knowing the basics of physical activity and movement practices is important to prevent injuries and maximize the health yield. ‘Mindful movement’ practices are certainly physically and mentally beneficial. However, overly strenuous physical activity can lead to injury. Check with a healthcare practitioner before beginning any exercise regime. Find a qualified teacher and share any specific health issues you have. And be sure to listen to your own body and do only what feels comfortable to you.

In conclusion, mull over this affirmation from the following systematic review undertaken by Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin (2006), Cardiovascular Physiology and Rehabilitation Laboratory, University of British Columbia:

There is incontrovertible evidence that regular physical activity contributes to the primary and secondary prevention of several chronic diseases and is associated with a reduced risk of premature death. There appears to be a graded linear relation between the volume of physical activity and health status, such that the most physically active people are at the lowest risk. However, the greatest improvements in health status are seen when people who are least fit become physically active… Health promotion programs should target people of all ages, since the risk of chronic disease starts in childhood and increases with age (p. 807).

The upshot is that nurses, like all people in our society, need to ‘get physical’- intentionally chose to engage in physical activity and keep moving to avoid chronic illness, improve vitality, and maintain wellbeing! As U. S. sport manufacture Nike says, JUST DO IT®!
References and Resources


NOTE: This information is not intended to take the place of advice from a healthcare professional. Check with your health care provider before starting any exercise program.