

# Walk Down the Energy Road!

By Ruth Gordon Howard RN, MA

Your body was made to *move*. God designed it that way, but today we're not moving much. We sit in front of our computers, drive everywhere, and engage in America's favorite leisure activity--watch TV. Everything we do today is easy compared to women of long ago. In centuries past, our ancestors had to be physically strong just to survive. "All in a day's work" for a woman meant she had to churn, chop, haul, walk miles to gather wood or food, have a baby, and possibly be back planting crops the next day. Of course, no one wants to go back; childbirth took the lives of many women and infectious diseases were the leading killers of the day. However, health risks women faced were not related to a sedentary lifestyle that resulted in lifestyle-related diseases. By necessity, they got all the physical activity they would ever need in a day.

Today, the number one cause of death for women is heart disease. Now, every year, up to 250,000 American deaths are related to lack of regular physical activity. A recent study showed that in the next decade, America's unhealthy lifestyle will become the number one cause of preventable deaths. James S. Marks MD, MPH, a CDC epidemiologist stated, "We believe diet, inactivity, and obesity--that constellation--will be the leading cause of death if things don't change."

Women who are not physically active are setting themselves up for greater risks for heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, some types of cancers, arthritis, and depression. Depression is a huge issue for women. In fact, women suffer from depression twice as often as men. If women are extremely overweight, they can also suffer from sleeping disorders and respiratory problems. There has been a dramatic rise in obesity. It has skyrocketed over the last few decades and more and more women are now carrying extra weight that's hurting their health. One thing that can't be measured is the toll on women's hearts and minds. But we can do something-- it doesn't have to be this way.

If you want to have more energy for all the things God has called you to do, there are important health-related reasons to get motivated, get moving, and start eating right.

## **Get Moving**

Getting moving and becoming more physically active is God's gift to help you feel better naturally. If used safely and effectively, physical exercise will do more for your health and energy level than anything I know. The benefits are tremendous. Studies show that physically active



women have fewer hospital stays and physician's visits, and they also use less medication than those who don't remain physically active.

Over the years we've heard tremendous claims by companies who are trying to sell women everything to give them the body of their dreams. If it sounds too good to be true, it is. Trends and buzzwords will always come and go, so focus on building a health-related fitness program on principles that have staying power. Make sure your program can deliver bottom-line results over a lifetime.

By God's grace, I've gained a bit of wisdom over the years, and I've learned time and time again that nothing beats ol' fashioned discipline and consistency to get the job done. There's a way you can add physical activity into your life that's simple and easy, and it will give you more benefits than you can imagine.

### **Benefits of Health-Related Fitness**

You will:

- Have more energy
- Burn more calories
- Decrease the effects of aging
- Have less body fat, more lean tissue
- Feel better about your body
- Strengthen your immune system
- Reduce the chance of depression
- Become stronger
- Improve your bone density
- Sleep more soundly
- Look your best
- Have a heart that works more efficiently
- Reduce your risks for heart disease

### **1440 Minutes Every Day**

We could all be better time managers. Considering what's at stake, can you invest a small amount of time in your health? You have 1440 minutes each and every day. How many minutes do you think you waste? If you took 30 of those wasted minutes, several times a week, and made a commitment to get moving, you would be on the road to having more energy and a new sense of well-being.

"Small, simple steps can often prevent or control chronic health problems such as diabetes, obesity, asthma, cancer, heart disease, and stroke," says U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Richard H. Carmona. "Prevention includes healthy eating habits and regular physical activity."

And that's all it takes, just a few simple steps to make a big difference. The actual physical activity guidelines by our nation's doctor state:

*To improve your health and fitness, get at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week, preferably daily. Greater amounts of physical activity may be necessary for the prevention of weight gain, for weight loss, or for sustaining weight loss.*

Thirty minutes every day is only 2 percent of your time--not much at all. *But it is huge in terms of promoting your health and increasing your energy level.* This small time investment will help you to do what God has called you to the other 98 percent of the time. You will not only reduce your risks for the leading cause of death among women--heart disease--but your bones will be stronger and less brittle and you will have less stress and a brighter outlook on life.

What does "moderate physical activity" mean? If you took a brisk walk and walked about two miles in 30 minutes, that would do it. If you have been living a sedentary lifestyle you can start by walking just a few minutes a day and work up to one 15 minute mile then very *gradually* increased your time and distance. You could also break up the 30 minutes into two or three walks during the day of only 10 minutes each. It all counts towards your total goal. Just find a way to be active and stick with it, whether it's walking, attending fitness classes, climbing stairs, pushing a baby stroller, or even gardening.

My older sister, Carol, is a walker. She walks two miles six days a week, rain or shine, sleet or snow. She never misses a day. She's also a school teacher and a very busy mother. She enjoys walking her dog, so he gets exercise, too. How does she do it and stick with it? It's not optional for her. She doesn't even consider not doing it; it's an appointment she keeps, like any other appointment or job. She also feels absolutely great. Can you make an appointment to be more physically active?

Throughout history, we've never been this sedentary before; it's a result of living in a land of incredible abundance. We have so many blessings, yet the very abundance we enjoy is causing us problems no one could have imagined a few short decades ago.

### **Are You Ready for Physical Activity?**

Are you motivated yet? Well, hold on Energy Girls®! We want this to be a change you make for a lifetime--something you can live with for a very long time--so it's important you follow a few simple guidelines. You'll be happy you did.

For most women, getting up and getting moving is going to provide wonderful benefits. But there are a few women for whom physical activity might be inappropriate, or they should have medical advice first concerning what activities might be best for them. Do you have any of following the conditions?

- Chest pains
- High blood pressure or any heart condition
- Dizziness, or balance problems
- Asthma
- Bone or joint problems
- Diabetes
- Any new, undiagnosed symptom or condition
- Any reason *you know of* that would keep you from engaging in physical activity

If you're pregnant, you also want to check with your doctor, before beginning an exercise program, or if you're over the age of 45. Please use common sense. If you have any of the above conditions, the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) advises you to seek a medical opinion about the type of exercise that is safe and appropriate for you before you start a physical activity program, and that's the exact recommendation I make.

### **What is Health-Related Fitness?**

There have been many definitions of what physical fitness is, and some of those definitions have changed over the years. Health-related fitness is all about the different elements of fitness that relate to one thing--your good health. Do you have energy as a woman, for all your everyday activities and to-do lists? Can you do those activities without getting overly tired? Do you have the energy you need for extra leisure activities, too? Would you have the energy you need to handle any emergency situation you might encounter? Answering yes to those questions is one simple definition of fitness. Whatever definition you use, let me assure you that nothing increases a woman's sense of physical well-being faster than getting on a safe and effective fitness program.

### **Components of Fitness**

It's a good idea to personalize your health-related fitness program, and you can do that by understanding the basic components of fitness: Aerobic Fitness, Muscular Fitness, Flexibility and Body Composition.

#### **Aerobic Fitness**

Cardiovascular or aerobic fitness helps your body produce more energy. "Cardio" refers to your heart and "vascular" to your blood vessels. The ability of your heart to deliver blood and oxygen to your working muscles during exercise is what cardiovascular (aerobic) exercise is all about. It makes your heart strong. Most women like the fact that getting in cardiovascular shape helps burn fat the fastest too. When you walk briskly, swim, ride a bike, or even climb the stairs, you can strengthen your heart and also lower your risk for heart disease.

## **Muscular Fitness**

You need both muscular strength and endurance. Strength refers to how much you can lift safely, and endurance refers to how many times you can lift safely. You need strong muscles to carry groceries, lift a toddler, or do a myriad of everyday tasks. The fastest way to see changes in your body is to combine strength training and aerobic exercise with a low fat diet. After the age of 20, women lose one pound of muscle every two years if they are inactive. Muscle is active tissue--the more muscle you have, the more calories you burn.

## **Flexibility**

Can you move as freely as you did 10 years ago? As we grow older, we lose flexibility and most women answer, no. Flexibility is about how much movement you have around different joints in your body. A safe and effective stretching program can help make sure you keep moving for a lifetime. Do you feel tension in your back, neck, or anywhere in your body? Most women say one of the best benefits they get from stretching is not only increased flexibility but release of tension. Gentle stretching can help you relax.

## **Body Composition**

If health-related fitness is your goal, what you weigh doesn't matter nearly as much as how much of your weight is fat. Too much fat can cause a host of problems for your health, and that's what's most important--not what you look like. As we age, our body fat increases. You can decrease that natural aging process by being on the right kind of health-related fitness program. If you develop more lean tissue and less body fat it will also change the way you look dramatically.

## **Energy Girls® Basic Get-Up-and-Go "Fit Facts"**

- **When in Doubt, Get Checked Out**

Make sure you follow ACSM guidelines that state, "If you have experienced any medical situation requiring a physician's care, or if you have been told to reduce your physical activity for any reason, you should consult your doctor before beginning an exercise program." Before you get up and go, get checked out.

- **Set Goals**

Be realistic. Set simple goals. Create a plan that works for you. That might be as simple as saying, "For the next four weeks, I will go for a walk every other day." If you will commit to any goal you set, you'll experience the added joy of success upon reaching your objective.

- **Get Dressed**

**Workout Wear** - Women are more likely to work out if they feel good about what they work-out in. That's not information from a scientific study. It's first-hand, personal experience as a woman. When we're happy about the way we look, we stick with the program. Dress for comfort, but

dress for beauty, too. Most women feel badly if they've let themselves get out of shape, and staying with a fitness plan is all about motivation. It will definitely motivate you if you have something to get dressed in that's appropriate fitness wear and makes you look good. Make sure your workout clothes are comfortable, breathable and easy fitting. If you need a reason to go buy something new and beautiful, consider it an investment in your health.

**Shoes** - Don't scrimp on shoes. Find a comfortable pair of fitness shoes you like, but before you buy them, walk around in them for several minutes to make sure they fit. Is there enough room in the toes? Buy shoes at the end of the day, when your feet are largest. You will get a more accurate fit. Depending on your unique foot shape, one brand of shoe might feel better than another. They are all made a little differently. So, don't worry about the brand as much as what works for you--and what feels great. The key point to remember is *comfort*.

- **Warm-up and Cool-down**

A warm-up prepares your body for more vigorous exercise to come. It's the gradual increase of your heart rate and is an important part of a fitness program. It's also a wonderful time to leave the worries of the day behind and switch gears mentally. A warm-up might be as simple as walking slowly and leisurely for 5 to 10 minutes before you start walking briskly, or marching in place. Always cool down at the end of your workout, too, so your heart rate can *gradually* return to normal. The cool-down is the best time to stretch, increase your flexibility, and just relax.

- **Energy Girls® Love to Walk**

Current national guidelines indicate that, to improve our health and fitness, we need to get physical activity most days of the week, preferably daily for 30 minutes. However, if you're new to all of this, just start walking 5 or 10 minutes a day. The key to success is to start off *very* slowly to prevent injuries, and gradually increase the intensity of your workout. Walking may be the best exercise of all because it's something everyone can do, and no special equipment is needed to get started. Start off with good posture, take long smooth strides, and let your arms swing comfortably at your sides. For fun, you can also get a pedometer and work towards the ultimate goal of walking 10,000 steps a day. You can start at 2,000 steps the first week and the second week 3,000, and so on--do whatever is appropriate in your situation. On days when there's bad weather, you can also do something Energy Girls® really love, "mall walk!"

- **The Talk Test**

Work out at the right intensity by taking the *Talk Test*. It's a simple concept. You must be able to talk while you're exercising. If you can't, slow it down. It's great to be perspiring and invigorated but if you're huffing and puffing so hard you can't carry on a conversation with a girlfriend, lighten up the intensity until you get enough oxygen, so you can talk.

- **Be a Strong Woman**

Stronger muscles and stronger bones will decrease a woman's risks for osteoporosis. Walking is a weight-bearing activity, but the best way to strengthen your muscles and bones is by lifting dumbbells, or by using strength-training equipment. It's best to consult with a certified health and fitness professional, to learn the safest way to add strength training to your personal fitness plan. To get strength training right, get special instruction.

- **Too Much, Too Soon**

The number one thing beginners do is exercise too intensely before their bodies can handle it. They get caught up in the excitement of how good they feel, workout too hard, and then suffer an injury or get so sore the next day they can't move. You didn't get out of shape overnight and you don't need to get in shape overnight, either. *Give yourself several weeks to slowly and gradually increase the intensity of your workouts.* The key is to start off slowly. That will prevent both injuries and soreness.

- **Take Small Steps**

There's lots of ways you can include physical activity in your daily routine.

Take the stairs, instead of an elevator.

Park further away from stores.

Take up any hobby or activity that gets you moving.

If there's ever an option of driving or walking--choose walking.

- **Two Marvelous Motivators**

**Listen to the Music** - Absolutely nothing motivates more than music. Get joyful praise music you can listen to that lifts your heart, as you work out. Music is a special gift from God. Most women say it's their favorite motivator to keep them moving, and it's also the number one way they stay inspired.

**No pressure** - Enjoy the exhilaration of getting your body moving again, without pressure. Work out when you feel the best and, for the first four weeks, only think about one thing--enjoying yourself. Get into the habit of working out. Make it a part of your routine. If you focus on having fun and enjoying the process instead of thinking of your workout as being "work," you will condition your mind to look forward to it regularly.

- **Expect Setbacks**

If you expect a few setbacks, they won't slow you down and discourage you when they come. If you miss a workout or two--or even several--don't use this as an excuse to stop. Just get right back on track and keep moving forward. Also, decide what the best time of day is for you to exercise. Are you a morning person or a night owl? If you know what works best for you, it will help you stick with it.

- **The Best Drink on Earth**

God made water the best drink on earth. Water is one of the most important components in our bodies. Stay hydrated when you work out. The best way to that that is to drink water before, during and after exercise.

- **Don't Make Excuses**

*"I don't have time."* You're right; you will never have time to work out *unless you make it a priority*. We always find time to do the things we want. You have to schedule the time, like any appointment you have to show up for. Decide it's not optional to become more physically active.

*"I have no energy. I'm tired."* After a few weeks on a consistent fitness program, you will have so much more energy you will be able to do everything more quickly--with energy to spare. Go for a walk down the Energy Road and get moving.

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