

# Living Large, Living Active

## Exercises for very large women

Most of us know that we should be exercising regularly. The public health messages are on display everywhere. For very large women, the thought of exercising in public or in an unsupportive environment is a strong disincentive. This, coupled with the common misconception that you must also diet and lose weight in order to be fit, can be a major deterrent.

### Facts and fallacies about fitness and fitness

*Fact: you can be fat and fit*

Ongoing research at The Cooper Institute in Texas suggests that fitness, not fatness, is the important issue in measuring health and identifying risk factors. Research so far suggests that fitness is a more powerful predictor of mortality than body mass index (BMI). Studies of more than 25,000 men indicate that low-fit men with a BMI of less than 27 were at a greater risk of premature death than high-fit men with a BMI of greater than 30 ('Physical Fitness, Mortality and Obesity' *International Journal of Obesity*, 1995, Suppl. 4, S41-44.). The expectation is that the results for women would be comparable.

*Fact: you don't have to diet to be fit*

The goal should be to achieve and maintain an appropriate level of fitness, rather than simply focusing on downsizing. The most important thing is to achieve a weight and body shape that is healthy for the individual, and one that can be maintained. Healthy behaviours (increased activity, lower fat diet, limiting alcohol consumption, reducing stress, quitting smoking) will all contribute to achieving this aim.

For many larger women, especially very large women, getting started on an exercise regime isn't easy. Larger women need to feel able to exercise in comfort and dignity. It can take a lot of courage to join even the most supportive aqua class at a public pool.

Fitness trainers need to be aware of the physiological and psychological concerns of larger women — they should lead respectfully and sensitively

The major hurdle for some larger women is to find an activity in a supportive environment with an appropriately qualified instructor. Some larger women find it difficult to sit on the floor — or get up again — and may need to be shown how to do it safely. Larger women often have knee and hip problems which can make some exercises painful and harmful. Larger bodies get hotter and sweat more, so larger women need to exercise in a cooler environment, preferably air-conditioned, and with access to showers. Equipment needs to be large and strong enough for very large bodies, and easy to climb on and off. Exercise mats need to be thicker and offer more resistance so that bones (for example tailbones) are protected.

Exercise should be safe, supportive, enjoyable, social, culturally appropriate, inexpensive, sustainable... and fun!

## Body Image and Physical Activity

Poor body image can make participation in enjoyable and sustainable physical activity difficult by:

- Preventing the person from commencing physical activity due to concerns about exposing one's body in public, feeling 'too fat' (Owen and Bauman, 1992) or feeling that he or she has to achieve a certain look before they can participate (Body Image and Better Health Program, 1997).
- Prompting the person to set unrealistic short-term body-shaping goals in an attempt to change their body quickly. This can lead to unsustainable and risky behaviours such as over-exercising or steroid use (Yesalis, et al, 1993; Brower, et al, 1994; and, Buckley, 1988).
- Leading the person to drop out when they feel disheartened that their exercise attempts have failed to produce rapid or major changes in body weight or shape. Feeling self-conscious about one's body has also been shown to lead some young people to drop out of physical activity (Shaw and Kemeny, 1989; and Embrey and Drummond, 1996).

(Research Summary: *Body Image and Health – What are the links?* Dr Susan Paxton and Thea O'Connor, January 2000).

## Appropriate exercise for larger women

Suitable physical activities include — aqua aerobics, swimming (or some kind of physical activity in water), Yoga, Tai Chi, walking, bush walking on flat terrain, dancing, belly dancing, Pilates, ten pin bowling, lawn bowls, billiards, pool and croquet.

**whm!**  
women's centre for health matters ●

But exercise doesn't have to be just about structured and regimented activities; it can be any physical activity, including housework and gardening. And you don't need to make any major dramatic changes; you can start small, for example walking around the house, dancing along to your favourite music, and gradually build up. The more you do, the more you will be able to do. And it doesn't have to be expensive. Probably the most important piece of equipment for larger women is the right footwear, and some sports shops sell last season's models at discount prices so once you know what to buy you can check out the bargains. Try on both shoes and wear the socks you'll wear when you exercise.



A recent study in Geneva found that 15 minutes a day of moderate or brisk walking, or 30 minutes a day of slow walking, was enough to maintain a reasonable level of fitness.

(Morabia A, Costanza MC. Division of Clinical Epidemiology, Geneva University Hospitals, Geneva, Switzerland.)

However, there are some sensible precautions. The wrong type of shoe or walking action can cause pain, blisters and injuries to soft tissue. Make sure your shoes are comfortable with appropriate heel and arch supports. Take light, easy steps and ensure your heel touches down before your toes. If possible, walk on grass rather than concrete to help absorb the impact.

Warming up before you start and cooling down will help reduce injury. The best way to warm up is to walk slowly. Start off each walk at a leisurely pace to give your muscles time to warm up, then pick up the speed. Afterwards, gently stretch your leg muscles, particularly your calves. Stretches should be held for around 20 seconds. If you feel any pain, ease off the stretch. Don't bounce or jolt, or you could overstretch muscle tissue and cause microscopic tears (*Walking can help to keep you healthy, Health Department, Victoria, 2002*).

Recent statistics show that the ACT is the most active state (or in this case, territory) in Australia with a participation rate of 85.9%. By far the most popular activity is walking (33.8%) (*Participation in Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey 2002*).

Larger women may prefer to start by walking around the house and then build up to short walks around your local area or favourite spot. One advantage is that it's not obvious that you are exercising. Start with a short walk and build up gradually to 15 minutes a day of brisk walking. Try to aim for 30 to 40 minutes a day on most days to improve your fitness.

You don't need to buy special clothes for walking just wear something fairly loose and comfortable, but don't overdress as you'll soon start to feel warm. It's a good idea to carry a water bottle with you and take frequent sips to avoid overheating. You should also wear a bra that gives good support.

If you find walking boring you could try walking with a friend or neighbour and this could also help you to stay motivated. You could also listen to a portable radio or cassette player, or just use the time to unwind. Try to think of this as your time out, a chance to relax and to do something just for you.

Whatever type of activity you try, you'll find that after a while your body will get used to it and you'll need to increase the intensity, walk that bit faster, or do something different to get the same benefit.

### Aerobic activities

An aerobic (means 'oxygen', not just aerobics at the gym!) activity is the best form of exercise, it can improve the efficiency of your heart and lungs by increasing your ability to use the oxygen you breathe in. It can also make muscles and joints stronger, give you more energy, make you feel better, and improve your sleep patterns. Many vigorous activities, such as walking, cycling, dancing, swimming, and ball games, can have an aerobic effect. The idea is to get your heart rate up and make you breathe heavier, but you should still be able to carry out a conversation. If you can't talk while exercising, slow down because you're working too hard!

Note your improvements  
Stay motivated  
Give yourself small rewards, for example  
a facial or a manicure

Getting motivated to start doing some sort of exercise is hard enough, but it's even harder to stay motivated. One option is to undertake some form of group activity where you are encouraged to participate. Another theory is that if you have to pay to undertake an activity you are more likely to continue because you've made a financial commitment. However, for some larger women the cost of starting exercise is a major barrier but there are some inexpensive options. For example, you can hire exercise equipment or check out the newspapers for second hand bargains.

### Walking

Walking is considered to be one of the best forms of aerobic exercise because you don't need to go anywhere, you just open the front door and there you are, and apart from the shoes it's relatively inexpensive. And walking is something you can do with your friends or as part of a group.

To add more physical activity to your day you could try:

- taking a brisk walk around the block with family, friends, or colleagues
- raking the leaves
- walking up the stairs instead of the lift — if it's safe to do so
- mowing the lawn
- taking an activity break at work or home. Get up and stretch or walk around
- parking your car further away from entrances of stores, movie theatres, or your home and walk the extra distance — if it's safe to do so.

### Water activities

Swimming and aqua aerobics are ideal activities because you are not supporting your own weight and it can ease the pressure on your joints but there are some disadvantages:

- it can be daunting fronting up at a pool wearing swimmers — and that's assuming you can find a pair of swimmers you feel comfortable in;
- it can be difficult getting in and out of the pool — especially if you're not very confident in the water. Swimming pools should have wide steps and railings for ease of access;
- larger bodies are more buoyant in the water and this needs to be factored into aqua programs; and
- pools can get crowded at certain times of the day so it can be hard to find a spot where you can swim at your own speed without banging into everybody. It's a good idea to check out your local pool or aquatic centre for suitable times and exercise programs.

Choose an activity you'll enjoy doing — if you aren't having a good time, modify the activity, alternate it with another activity, or try something completely different!

### Other activities

Laughter can also have beneficial effects. Laughing 100 times is equal to 10 minutes on the rowing machine or 15 minutes on an exercise bike! Laughing can reduce blood pressure, increase vascular blood flow and oxygenation of the blood which can assist in healing.

Laughter also gives your diaphragm, abdominal, respiratory, facial, leg and back muscles a workout. That's why you often feel exhausted after a long bout of laughter — you've just had an aerobic workout!

Music can be another means of being active, whether playing, or trying to play, a musical instrument, or listening to your favourite music while exercising. 'Music For Everyone' offers group and private music classes for a wide range of instruments and for all levels of ability. Experienced music therapists, who have extensive backgrounds in music, movement, and creative arts, run the classes.

Singing is another activity that can be fun as well as a means of increasing the flow of oxygen and exercising the facial muscles. Not all of us have great singing voices, or even the vocal strength and range to belt out a song, but you can practice in the bathroom or even join a singing group.

And don't forget you can also indulge in physical activity in the privacy of your own bedroom! Paul Pearsall, PhD, author of *Superimmunity*, suggests that physical intimacy can have the same health benefits as other forms of exercise. It can help the immune system by increasing the flow of certain chemicals in the body. It also releases endorphins which make us feel good and reduces pain. Research suggests that having sex three times per week burns up the same number of calories as running 75 miles (7,500 calories to be exact)!

Please note: You may wish to consult a physician before you begin any exercise program. You may also wish to consult a physiotherapist. They can help you to identify the most appropriate and safe exercise program for your level.

### References

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- Hsu, L. (1997) Can Dieting Cause an Eating Disorder? *Psychological Medicine*, (27) 511.
- Kenardy, J. and Brown, W. J. Dieting and health in young Australian women. *Health Psychology*, In Press.

# Useful Contacts for Living Large

- ACT Rowing Association Ph: 6282 0639
- ACT Swimming Inc Ph: 6275 4837
- ACT Walking for Pleasure  
Belconnen Ph: 6278 5312  
Woden Ph: 6286 3420
- Australian Dance Council Ph: 6248 8992
- Australian Institute of Sport Pool Complex, Bruce, Ph: 6214 1264
- Canberra Croquet Club Inc Ph: 6273 1030
- Canberra International Sports and Aquatic Centre Belconnen Ph: 6251 7555
- Canberra North Bowling Club Ph: 6257 3560
- Canberra Olympic Pool Canberra City Ph: 6248 6799
- Community Colleges  
Erindale College Community Education Program Ph: 6205 8107  
Lake Tuggeranong College Community Program Ph: 6205 6220
- Fernwood Women's Health Clubs  
Belconnen Ph: 6251 5299  
Canberra City Ph: 6247 7666  
Woden Ph: 6281 7199
- Gentle Exercise Belconnen Community Centre Ph: 6264 0232
- Heart Foundation ACT Walking Group Ph: 6269 2635
- Hydrotherapy – talk to your physiotherapist if you have a condition which affects your mobility or other health issues
- Kaleen Swim Centre Ph: 6241 4893
- Kippax Pool & Fitness Centre Holt Ph: 6254 9330
- Lawn Bowls  
ACT Bowls Association Turner ACT Ph: 6257 3560  
Canberra Forrest Women's Bowling Club Forrest Ph: 6295 2508
- Living Large c/- Women's Centre for Health Matters Ph: 6290 2166
- Odd-Bods Gym & Fitness Centre, Queanbeyan Ph: 6297 7788
- Music For Everyone, Ainslie Arts Centre, Eloura Street, Braddon Ph: 6230 7190
- Pilates Exercises Ph: 6291 8368
- Pitch 'n' Putt Yamba Sports Club Philip Ph: 6283 2126
- Posture and Flexibility (Kit Laughlin & Associates) Ph: 6125 2273
- Putt Putt Golf Course, Dickson Ph: 6247 0509
- Step Into Life, Lyneham Ph: 6247 2911
- Tai Chi Academy Ph: 6296 1357
- Tai Chi Association of Australia Ph: 6294 3307
- Tai Chi for Beginners, Belconnen Community Centre Ph: 6264 0232
- Ten Pin Bowling  
ACT Tenpin Bowling Association Canberra City Ph: 6257 5381  
AMF Belconnen Bowl Belconnen Ph: 6251 6966  
AMF Woden Ph: 6282 3122  
Bowl Australia Tuggeranong Ph: 1800 242 695
- Walking for Pleasure Ph: 6296 6276
- Women's Centre for Health Matters, Pearce Admin: Ph: 6290 2166  
Health Information Line: Ph 6286 2043
- Yoga  
ACT Yoga and Meditation Centre, O'Connor Ph: 6247 9187  
Canberra City Yoga, Braddon Ph: 6262 7976  
South Canberra Yoga School Ph: 6288 1462  
Woden Yoga Ph: 6286 1921  
YMCA Ph: 6249 8733  
YWCA of Canberra Ph: 6239 6878