



F a w z i a S u l t a n
REHABILITATION
I n s t i t u t e

Effects of Cardiovascular Fitness

By Chris Sulway

If exercise could be bottled, it would be a best-selling potion in pharmacies around the world. Regular physical exercise has a number of proven, positive health effects, especially on heart health. Vigorous exercise strengthens the heart as a pump, making it a larger, more efficient muscle. Even moderate activity can boost good cholesterol, aid the circulatory system, lower blood pressure and blood fats. All these effects translate into reduced risk for heart disease, heart attack, and stroke.

Unfortunately, every few years, surveys confirm the well-known fact that most people aren't active enough. The American Heart Association attributes about 250,000 deaths a year in the U.S. to lack of regular physical activity. The reasons for inactivity aren't hard to figure out. Most of us have jobs where we are not very active, sitting a lot of the day. We also rely heavily on modern, labour-saving devices—cars, appliances, and power tools—to spare us manual effort.

Virtually everyone can get health benefits from activity. Cardiovascular fitness can be described as your body's ability to get oxygen and blood to the muscles. When you do physical activity and your pulse quickens and your breathing gets deeper, you are using your cardiovascular system. You can improve your cardiovascular system's efficiency through regular training. To accomplish this, at the minimum you need to exercise 3-4 times per week for 20 to 40 minutes per session. This can include any type of moderate intensity exercise that raises your heart rate to between 60 and 80% of your maximum heart rate. This is called your "Target Heart Rate" and is the range of heart beats per minute at which you should work at in order to best achieve aerobic fitness. You can roughly calculate this by subtracting your age from 220 then multiplying it by 0.6 and 0.8. So if you are a 40 year old, your target heart rate is between 108 and 144 beats per minute. The bottom end of the range is best for low intensity training while the top end is for high intensity training. This can involve biking, walking, jogging, swimming; it all depends on your preference. Your heart rate is your guide for cardiovascular exercise intensity.

Cardiovascular fitness mainly concerns the health of the heart and the increase of its strength. In addition to this benefit, some of the well known benefits of having good cardiovascular fitness include the fact that it helps to lower your resting heart rate, which allows your heart to pump more blood around the body per beat. This results in your heart not being exerted as hard when you are at rest. The lowering of the resting heart rate helps to control blood pressure; high blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease.

Another risk factor for heart disease is obesity, which cardiovascular exercise helps to lower. The more active you are, the more calories you'll burn, which can help with weight loss. Exercise promotes fat loss and builds muscle. This, in turn, increases your body's metabolic rate, the rate at which you burn calories—even after you've finished exercising.

Cardiovascular fitness and exercise also help in everyday living, such as walking up a flight of stairs. Cardiovascular exercise increases stamina and increases the ability for your body to do continuous work. Other benefits include increased muscle strength and endurance, improvement and maintenance of joint strength and improved functioning of the immune system. It is well documented in the research literature that cardiovascular exercise reduces the risk of heart disease, colon cancer and breast cancer. In addition a healthy body means a healthy mind. Cardiovascular fitness improves your self-esteem, confidence and has been shown to have positive effects on reducing stress and anxiety.

If you are already active, then you can modify your exercise to include at least 3 days a week of cardiovascular exercise a week in your target heart range. If you are inactive or are unsure of how to start a program for cardiovascular fitness, it is advised that you speak to your doctor to get medical clearance for exercise. You can then consult a physiotherapist or personal trainer for a fitness assessment and guidance on how to begin a program that focuses on cardiovascular fitness which is also individualized to meet your needs.

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