

What is Physical Activity?

Physical activity simply means movement of the body that uses energy. Walking, gardening, briskly pushing a baby stroller, climbing the stairs, playing soccer, and dancing are all good examples of being active. The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommends that youth get at least 60 minutes of physical activity a day.

The key guidelines for school-aged children and adolescents focus on three types of activity—aerobic, muscle strengthening, and bone strengthening. Each has important health benefits. Certain activities can be aerobic as well as muscle or bone strengthening.

Aerobic activities are those in which young people rhythmically move their large muscles for a sustained period of time. Running, hopping, skipping, jumping rope, swimming, dancing, and bicycling are all examples of aerobic activities. Aerobic activities increase cardiorespiratory fitness. Children often do activities in short bursts, which may not technically be aerobic. However, the Guidelines uses the term aerobic to refer to these types of activities, even if they are done only briefly.

Muscle-strengthening activities make muscles do more work than usual during activities of daily life. This is called overload and strengthens the muscles. Muscle-strengthening activities can be unstructured and part of play, such as playing on playground equipment, climbing trees, and playing tug-of-war. Or they can be structured, such as lifting weights or working with resistance bands.

Bone-strengthening activities produce a force on the bones of the body that promotes bone growth and strength. This force is commonly produced by impact with the ground. Running, jumping rope, basketball, tennis, and hopscotch are all examples of bone-strengthening activities. As these examples illustrate, bone strengthening activities can also be aerobic and muscle strengthening.