

The Best Medicine Maybe Exercise: Start with a Springtime Jog

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PIKE PLACE MARKET CLINIC

I played sports in high school. In college, I started running. Even though I was in relatively good shape, it was painful. I cursed every step, and had to force myself to put on my running shoes at the end of the day. Then, after a year, something miraculous happened. It stopped hurting. As I ran along the shore of Lake



Michigan, organic chemistry, English papers, and med-school applications all slipped away. I watched winter set in—ice forming on the surface of the water, and I watched spring melt it away again. I ran through the summer and under the changing leaves in the fall. I did this for years. It was meditative and, despite the cafeteria food and way too much coffee, I never felt better physically. I

knew that I would always be a runner and I couldn't imagine life without it.

Then residency happened. My running slowed to once or twice a week. Then it stopped all together. It has now been seven years since I have been involved in any kind of regular cardiovascular exercise, short of getting walked, a few blocks, by my seven-pound poodle.

As a doctor, and former runner, I know as well as anyone, how important exercise is for body and mind. We are not designed to spend our time in cars, or in front of computer screens or television sets. We are biological machines designed or rather evolved—to be physically active.

According to the Mayo clinic, exercise:

- * Improves depression, pain, and stress by releasing and balancing the brain chemicals (neurotransmitters) that regulate your mood. These neurotransmitters—serotonin and norepinephrine—are the same chemicals targeted by antidepressant medications. Exercise also produces endorphins, which are natural chemicals that assist in pain relief, relaxation, and a sense of well-being.
- * Strengthens cardiovascular and

respiratory system. Exercise is great for your cholesterol and blood pressure, but it also directly strengthens your heart and lungs, so that you are better able to take in, and distribute, oxygen to nourish your cells.

- * Keeps bones and muscles strong. Weight-bearing exercise, such as walking, running, lifting weights, or working with resistance tubing, helps prevent osteoporosis, or thinning-of the bones, and may actually increase bone density. It also improves muscle tone, which can help with your posture, strength, coordination, and balance.

- * Helps you achieve and maintain a healthy weight. When you exercise you burn calories and lose weight. Exercise can also help to regulate, or speed up, your metabolism.

- * Promotes restful sleep. Regular exercise helps you relax and sleep better at night.

- * Reduces your risk of cancer. Exercise has been proven to reduce the risk of colon, uterine, breast, and prostate cancer.

- * Prevents and manages diabetes. Exercise lowers your blood sugar, and helps your body use insulin more efficiently.

- * Helps you look better and improves your self-esteem.

Regular exercise is good for people of all ages and sizes; and it doesn't have to be painful. The key is determination and patience. Do not expect Olympian speed-skater thighs overnight; but, I guarantee, if you embark on a sustainable exercise program and remain committed, in time, you will reap the benefits; and it will become a part of your life and daily routine, like brushing your teeth, or sipping your morning coffee.

So start slow and easy. If you are ninety years old, this might mean getting out of your chair, and walking down the hall once a day; or if you cannot walk, you can raise your arms up and down a few times a day. If you are overweight and/or out of shape, start by walking around the block three days a week. Maybe in a year, you will be able to walk half of a mile. In five years, you will be walking five miles a day. If you have arthritis and your knees ache when you walk, get in the pool. Perhaps, to start, all you'll do is get in, and out, of the pool. That's a start and, take it from me, getting started is the hardest part of it all.

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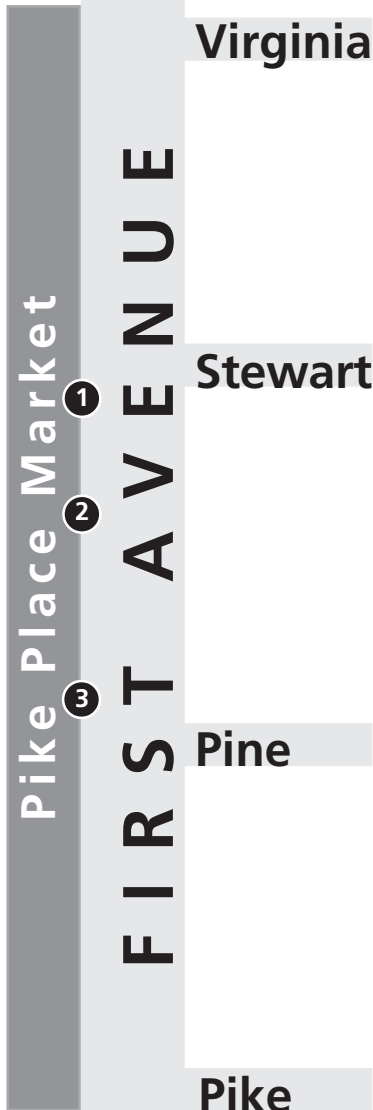
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