

First Steps to Fitness: Secrets to Incorporating Fitness into Your Life

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You're ready to jump into the wonderful world of fitness and wellness. Where do you begin? If you're reading this report, you already know why you should begin, so I won't waste your time or mine telling you what you already know. I'll focus on how you begin a fitness program, how to get a little bit of exercise into every day of your life and how to maintain your fitness program over time.

Let's begin at the beginning. You've decided to "get fit." What does that mean? How will you know when you *are* fit? If you don't have a destination for your fitness program, you can't map out how to get there. So let's create a destination. Answer the following questions:

✧ **Why do I want to be fit?** This is not a philosophical question. Think about why you have decided to work on your fitness. "Because the doctor told me to," is not a good enough reason. You must internalize the "why." It's *your* body, *your* life and *your* time and you won't just give it away to someone else. So why do you want to be fit? Do you want to sleep better? Reduce stress? Manage diabetes? Get off blood pressure medication? Make sure it's *your* reason to get fit and not someone else's.

✧ **What does "being fit" mean to me?** Here's your destination. What can you do when you are fit that you cannot do today? Do you want to be able to get down to the ground to work in the garden and then be able to get up again? Do you want to keep up with the kids or grandkids? Do you want to be able to place a

heavy box on the top shelf? Maybe you want to run a 5k race or play tennis like you did 10 years ago. Make a choice, set a goal, choose your destination. Decide how you define “being fit.”

✈ **How will being fit enhance my life?** Decide on the benefits to you of being fit.

Exercise has been shown to have beneficial effects on energy levels, sex drive, sleep patterns, blood pressure¹, cholesterol and blood sugar levels². Hooray! But for some, these are just numbers on a chart. How do you translate these numbers into real-life enhancements? Perhaps when you are sleeping better you will have more patience with your friends/family/co-workers. Lower blood pressure will allow you to save the money you are currently spending on medications. Figure out how your fitness goals will make a real difference in your life.

Your fitness plan reality check. Please keep in mind that being fit and/or thin will not make your life “perfect.” Will you have more energy when you’re fit? Very likely. Will you have an outlet for stress? Yes. Will you sleep better? Very likely. Will the problems you have with your significant other magically disappear? No. Will the kids suddenly be well-behaved? No. Bluebirds will not sing at your shoulder as you blissfully make your way through the forest either. You will see real changes in your life and that’s why you must answer the above questions before embarking on any fitness program. Using these 3 simple questions, you will be able to set goals, achieve them and stay on the fitness track for the rest of your life. So, what’s next? A little more groundwork before you hit the gym.

- ✧ **Break out the calendar.** Time to put the goals in writing. You can make your calendar as detailed as you want...plan every day or just check off days that you've worked out. Only you know what system will work best for you. If you spend so much time planning your workouts that you don't have time to workout, you've obviously gone too far. Find the balance between what keeps you on track and what leads you astray.

- ✧ **Set daily, weekly, monthly goals.** Research shows that having specific, challenging goals increases your ability to reach the goal³. Just doing your best is often not enough motivation. So put your goals in writing on your calendar. Remember that daily, weekly and monthly goals will vary and be different from each other. Examples of daily goals can be 30 minutes of cardio, run two flights of stairs or park the car at the far end of the parking lot. Weekly goals can be workout 3 times, walk a total of 10 miles, lose 1 pound. Monthly goals should be the sum of your weekly or daily goals. So, if your goal is to lose one pound per week, your monthly goal will be lose 4-5 pounds or workout 12 times or walk 40 miles. You get the idea.

- ✧ **Enjoy your plan.** Choose exercise you *like* to do. Whatever you do, make sure you choose exercises that you enjoy doing. Don't make running the main activity in your fitness plan if you hate to run. Do you like dancing? Your goal can be to dance 4 hours in a week. Maybe take a dance-centered fitness class.

Remember, it's your plan and if it is more like work than fun, you won't stick with it no matter how good your intentions are.

- ✧ **Be flexible with your plan.** Planning is a powerful tool. Don't let your plan ruin your life. There is a fine line between making fitness a priority and letting the plan ruin things for you. If your child stays home from school sick and you can't go to the gym, don't worry about it. There are alternatives...walk laps up and down the block, walk up and down the stairs in the house. Or maybe even just skip today. Just don't skip tomorrow. Having a plan will keep you on track when life gets in the way of your workout and helps you to keep fitness as a priority.

- ✧ **Be realistic with your plan.** This one repeats some of the earlier advice, but it can't be said enough. Be realistic with your goals and planning. Losing 20 pounds in two weeks is not realistic. Neither is losing 10 pounds in 2 weeks. Is it possible? There are many diet products out there that will tell you that it is. What happens after the two weeks? We are talking about making a *lifestyle* change and being fit and healthy for the rest of your life, not just looking "skinny" for some upcoming event.

- ✧ **Keep your perspective.** You can't lose 10 pounds in 2 weeks and having one cookie will not take you back to square one. As long as you keep it to one cookie and then get back on track. Long-term change is not about being perfect every day. It's about making smarter choices as often as you can. It takes practice and

when you start, you may make mistakes. That's ok as long as you learn a lesson from your mistakes, don't beat yourself up about making them. If you make good, healthy choices 6 out of 7 days week after week, you're doing great!

- ✧ **All movement is good movement.** Exercise does not have to be complicated. It's simply about keeping the body in motion. On days when you can't get in your usual 1 hour (or longer) workout, just make sure you do something active. This may be the day you park far away and walk a longer distance to the mall. It may be the day you take the stairs instead of the elevator. Maybe it's the day you do some spring cleaning or gardening. It all counts. And this is how you stay fit for the long term. You accomplish something, no matter how seemingly insignificant each and every day.

Working the plan into your life. You've planned the work and now it's time to work the plan. Here's how you get started.

- ✧ **Follow the plan.** Now that you have created the plan, make a commitment to stick to it. I find that writing out a contract with myself and actually signing it is a powerful tool that helps me to stick to any plan I create. Don't hesitate to enlist a friend or loved one to sign the contract with you. Having a partner make the same commitment can help you to stay on track.
- ✧ **Listen to your body.** If you are going along according to plan, day one will inspire day two and so on. You will find reserves of energy you didn't know you had. Leave the gym feeling like you want to come back for more tomorrow. If,

however, by day 3 or 4 you are feeling too sore or tired, listen to your body, be flexible in your schedule and adjust your goals accordingly. Tweaking is ok.

✧ **Create a reward system.** This is the greatest secret to staying on track. At the end of your first month, give yourself a reward for sticking with it. Give yourself rewards at regular intervals. I don't mean run out and have an ice cream sundae. Think more along the lines of new gym shoes. Maybe a gym bag or a new t-shirt. Rewards don't have to be expensive and they should never sabotage the hard work you've put in. Don't underestimate the advantages of rewards and don't be afraid to splurge on yourself. Yes, exercise has its own rewards and sometimes that's just not enough to sustain you. Sometimes knowing there's a prize at the end of the month is more inspiring than the scale...be bold and have fun creating your rewards.

Using technology to your advantage. Technology can offer inspiration and guidance.

There are literally thousands of health and wellness oriented websites out there. How do you know what's reputable and giving you good information and what's not. Some of my favorites are listed here. These sites are reliable, research-based and incredibly helpful.

✧ **President's Council on Fitness:** www.Fitness.gov Here you will find national news about fitness. And there's a link to take the Adult Fitness Challenge. Do you remember the fitness challenge you took in grade school? It's been adapted

for adults. Log on and see how fit you are today, then again in a few months after you've been following your plan to track your improvements.

✧ **My Pyramid Tracker:** www.MyPyramidTracker.gov. It's a bit of a long web address, but this site is great. Based on the USDA Food Guide Pyramid, you can use this site to track your food intake and your activity level. The databases of food and activity choices are robust. The food list includes familiar foods like apples and oranges to more exotic foods like couscous and hummus. And you can choose from cooked, raw and various preparations of each food as well as different portion sizes. Activity selections range from walking up the stairs to running, cycling and skiing. They even have "walking to the outhouse" as an option. It's a great place to explore and track your progress. You can also check your food/activity balance...have you taken in more calories than you've expended for the day? The site will process your info and tell you.

✧ **The American College of Sports Medicine:** www.ACSM.org. Here you will find the latest information on exercise guidelines, recommendations and research. Much of the info is geared for professionals and there is also a "General Public" page, which has additional links and resources about exercise.

Sticking with it. So now you're ready to get started, you have created your plan, made the commitment. How do you maintain the momentum?

✧ **Make the long-term commitment and keep it one day at a time.** Being fit is a lifestyle change and it can only happen one day at a time. If you can focus even 5 minutes on exercise each and every day, you will be able to look back in a year, two years, ten years and say, “Wow! I’ve changed my life in just 5 minutes.” Resist the idea of forever... it’s entirely too daunting and unpredictable. Instead, focus on today. Make one change today. Don’t worry about tomorrow or next week or next month. It’s too easy to find distractions and excuses. Focus on today and begin making your changes now.

✧ **Vary your workouts.** You’ve planned your activity, you’ve had some success. What now? Change it. Find a new challenge, change something to keep yourself interested. This could mean changing sports, changing venues or changing the time of day that you work out. Don’t get stuck in a rut! And when you are feeling stuck, make the change immediately! Don’t wait til you’re so bored you stop altogether.

Most of all, enjoy every minute of it. Find your fun activity, feel your muscles working, breathe deeply, live it fully. It will inspire you to do it again tomorrow and each tomorrow that follows.

Ginny Grupp holds an MS in Exercise Science and Health Promotion, is an ACE-certified personal trainer and NASM Performance Enhancement Specialist. She promotes healthy lifestyles through her personal training and fitness education company www.AlaskaFit.com.

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