

How Short Can a 'Short Workout' Really Be?

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Some people thrive on hours-long runs and sweaty Peloton classes, but a much larger group of people lack the time, motivation, or ability for long workouts. Take, for example, those with chronic health conditions, limited mobility, prior negative fitness experiences, or the hopelessly overscheduled.

That doesn't mean they have to forgo the physical and psychological benefits of exercise. In recent years, headlines have touted research on the benefits of a few minutes of physical activity. Not to mention the cottage fitness industry that has risen in response by promising physical transformations in X minutes a day (or less!).

What's true? What's too good to be true? Can short bursts of activity – 10 minutes or less – really help improve your health and fitness? Even when U.S. Health and Human Services physical activity guidelines recommend 150-300 minutes (2.5 to 5 hours) of moderate intensity movement per week?

The research says yes. While you should never expect total-body transformation, short workouts, even 10 minutes or less, really can improve your health, mental wellbeing, and fitness—if you approach them right.

Why Short Bursts of Movement Can Be Beneficial

Since at least 2005, researchers have been attempting to pinpoint just how short you can go and still benefit, says [Edward F. Coyle, Ph.D.](#), professor and director of the Human Performance Laboratory at the University of Texas.

Part of the equation is intensity. His studies show 10-minute workouts in which people cycle as hard as they can for 4 seconds, then rest for 15 to 30 seconds, improve fitness in [young](#) and [older adults](#) (and in the latter, also build muscle mass). Other studies have [shown](#) shorter "exercise snacks"—climbing three flights of stairs three times, with one to four hours in between—improved fitness over six weeks.

By turning up the intensity, Coyle says, these interval sessions temporarily deprive your muscles of both fuel and the oxygen they need to produce more, just like longer workouts. In response, your blood volume increases, your heart pumps more with each beat, and your muscle cells develop more mitochondria (tiny energy-producing factories).

That doesn't mean less-intense physical activity isn't beneficial, too. It is. In fact, there are several ways you can approach shorter movement sessions and really do well.

1. "Accumulate" a healthier lifestyle by moving throughout the day

To reap the myriad benefits of physical activity—from [lower blood pressure](#) to [better sleep](#) to a longer [life](#)—health experts recommend the aforementioned 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity weekly. Moderate means your heart's beating faster, but you can still speak.

That averages out to 20 minutes daily. However, if you've been inactive or have physical or logistical limitations, a full 20 minutes can seem daunting.

Fortunately, the most recent update to the [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#) specifically states you don't have to log those minutes at once. *Any amount of movement "counts" toward the total.*

Four minutes here, eight minutes there, another five minutes again later ... it all adds up.

In fact, depending on what you do with the rest of your hours, small, frequent bouts of movement may be better for your health than one solid workout.

"Being very sedentary all day and just doing 30 minutes of exercise once a day is not very healthy for you," says [Anthony Wall, M.S.](#), a certified personal trainer and spokesperson for the [American Council on Exercise](#). Emphasis on *very sedentary*. Long periods of sitting have their own [health risks](#), including more heart disease and diabetes. While a single concentrated workout session is better than nothing, it may not reverse the damage done by all that sitting.

Remember: Our bodies are designed for movement. It's okay to work up to 150 minutes gradually. Begin where you are, perhaps with a 5-minute walk around the block or easy stretches or exercises on the nearest patch of carpet. Establish consistency, then add on—it'll feel easier as body and mind adapt.

"Data [shows](#) the more you exercise, the more motivated you'll be to exercise," says [Julia Basso](#), Ph.D., assistant professor and director of the Embodied Brain Laboratory at Virginia Tech University. When you crave movement, it's easier to sneak it in. Eventually, all those minutes will add up to 150 a week – or more.

2. Improve mood and thinking as well as your health

Short sessions of physical activity also benefits brain function, says Basso, a neuroscientist and dancer. Moving your body increases blood flow to the brain and modulates levels of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and [dopamine](#). It also stimulates the release of growth factors that, over time, help sprout new brain cells.

And movement has near-immediate perks. In a recent Japanese [study](#), running for just 10 minutes improved participant's moods and reaction times on a color-word matching [test](#). Brain imaging showed increased activity in prefrontal cortex areas that control executive functions such as attention, planning, and working memory.

So if you're feeling low, stressed, or stuck on a tough problem at work, try a 10-minute break for moderate movement. In this case, don't go all-out—tougher workouts still benefit your brain over time, but the immediate stress response may temporarily cloud your thinking, Basso says.

Instead, level up by adding another brain-boosting element like social connection or rhythmic music. Walk with a friend, for instance, or fire up a playlist and dance.

3. Gain fitness through brief, hard bursts

The government's exercise [guidelines](#) acknowledge the harder you work, the faster you reap rewards. Choosing more vigorous activities—where you're breathing so hard you can only gasp a few words—halves the minimum requirement to 75 minutes weekly.

Plus, intensity brings added fitness gains, Wall says. This includes getting better at sport-specific skills and building anaerobic endurance, or the ability to work harder for longer periods of time.

However, the short, hard approach has its challenges. It's often tricky to replicate lab-based protocols in the real world (Coyle's cycling experiments, for example, use [specialized bikes](#)). Warming up first can add time; stair-climbing study participants began with 10 jumping jacks, 10 air squats, and five lunges on each leg.

Finally, pushing hard is uncomfortable. Doing it daily puts you at risk of overtraining or injury, Wall says. Even Coyle himself alternates three days per week of 4-second training with 45-minute steady rides, where he can watch Netflix.

Longer sessions bring more pronounced improvements in health markers like blood pressure and resting heart rate, Wall says. And while any movement is better than none, mixing up everything from modality to length and intensity likely provides the biggest bounty of benefits.

Consider these physical activity ideas "ingredients," Wall says. "We all eat vegetables, but some of us like bell peppers more than carrots and tomatoes. We all need to get our five fruits and vegetables a day—but how we mix it up, there's a lot of variation there. Movement works the same way."

Sources:

[Edward F. Coyle, Ph.D.](#), professor and director of the Human Performance Laboratory at the University of Texas

[Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#)

[Anthony Wall, M.S.](#), a certified personal trainer and spokesperson for the [American Council on Exercise](#)

[Julia Basso, Ph.D.](#), assistant professor and director of the Embodied Brain Laboratory at Virginia Tech University

[Do Stair Climbing Exercise "Snacks" Improve Cardiorespiratory Fitness?](#)

[Inertial Load Power Cycling Training Increases Muscle Mass and Aerobic Power in Older Adults.](#)

Cindy Kuzma is a freelance writer in Chicago and co-author of several books, including [Breakthrough Women's Running: Dream Big and Train Smart](#), and [Rebound: Train Your Mind to Bounce Back Stronger from Sports Injuries](#). She also co-hosts [The](#)

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