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8 Best and Worst Exercises for Your Heart



Some days it seems I answer more questions about sports injuries than I do about heart health. It's partly because my patients know I'm pretty active (golf, tennis, Pilates...), but also because many people don't realize that while some activities are good for your heart, they can be hard on your body. To me, the key is to find what works well for both.

Here's how I rank a variety of exercises in terms of their benefits to both your heart and overall health.

BEST

Interval training:

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This is unrivaled for preventing heart disease and diabetes, losing weight, and efficiently improving fitness. The strategy: Combine short bursts of high-intensity exercise with slightly longer periods of active recovery. So if you're a walker, you might alternate 3 minutes at normal speed with 1 minute at a brisk pace. Continuously raising and lowering your heart rate improves vascular function, burns calories, and makes the body more efficient at clearing fat and sugar from the blood.

Weight training:

In a sense, this is just another form of interval training. You increase your heart rate during reps and recover between sets. By efficiently handling the demands placed upon them, strong muscles ease the overall burden on the heart. Use free weights, which recruit more muscles, engage your core, and build balance.

Core workouts:

The reason I like Pilates, which strengthens my core muscles and improves flexibility and balance,

is that it doesn't just help me play golf and tennis better, it helps me live better. In order to exercise vigorously—as well as carry groceries upstairs and weed the garden—you need a solid foundation.

Yoga:

The calm it provides lowers blood pressure, making blood vessels more elastic and promoting heart health. It also strengthens your core.

Being active all day:

People who are active in little ways the entire day (cleaning, gardening, running errands) burn more calories and are generally healthier than those who exercise for 30 to 60 minutes and then sit at a computer. Wear a pedometer to measure how active you are outside of your exercise time.

WORST

Running long-distance on pavement:

I did a lot of this until various aches and pains, plus all the injured joggers I saw in my practice, made me realize that humans aren't designed for long-term pounding. Although running this way strengthens the heart, it wears out the body.

Any type of vigorous exercise you haven't trained for:

This can range from shoveling snow to biking 20 miles on the first spring day. The excessive adrenaline that's released can prompt a heart attack in those at risk. For the same reason, never exercise hard without warming up.

Finally, don't let science (or even me) dictate your exercise. Research may show swimming is tops, but if (like me) you don't enjoy it, then don't torture yourself. Find something fun that you'll do consistently. Your mood will get a boost as well.

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