

FITNESS PLAN SERIES

# Getting a HEADSTART

## SPEND YOUR 20s AND 30s SETTING THE FOUNDATION FOR A HEALTHY LIFE.

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### WITH THE TURBULENCE OF YOUR TEENAGE YEARS

behind you and your adult life looming ahead, being in your 20s certainly has its merits. You're enjoying your first steady paycheck and discovering an independent life — meeting new friends, dating and travelling.

When your life is packed with such excitement, looking ahead isn't something that's on the top of your to-do list. At this stage, it might seem as if nothing can go wrong — and yet, it is ironically the best time to start planning for the curve balls life might throw at you. For most, this means setting up a savings plan, buying life insurance, or even thinking about retirement planning. And just like saving for retirement, fitness is something that is best started early and practised often.

Your 20s are the best time to start building your "fitness savings", as body-building hormones such as testosterone and growth hormones are at their most plentiful. This helps you build up strength and endurance quickly, giving you a cushion of energy and lean muscle that you can draw on as you age.

In fact, recent studies have shown that this is the best time to build stronger bones — scientists at a Swedish university found that those who exercised during their 20s

benefited from stronger bones and a reduced risk of fractures later on in life.

While research has shown that late bloomers can reverse the effects of a sedentary lifestyle, it is much easier to get the ball rolling when you are in your 20s and 30s. The earlier you start, the less you have to do — just ask any 40 year-old who is trying to get into shape.

The benefits of getting (and staying) fit are many. For one, exercise burns calories, helping you to manage your weight. Aerobic activity helps strengthen your heart muscles, which gives you greater endurance and means you won't tire as easily. According to the Health Promotion Board, physical activity also helps reduce your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, osteoporosis — and even some cancers.

One more recently-discovered benefit of exercise is an improvement in mental health. According to researchers at Columbia University, exercising about two to four hours a week produces psychological benefits, including a reduction in depression and anxiety.

### Getting Started

To reap these rewards, all it takes is just two to three hours of physical activity a week. Experts suggest that you pick an



## Your fitness checklist

### All revved up to get in shape? Here's what to take note of

- Get a clean bill of health from your doctor before embarking on a new fitness regimen.
- Set aside some time each week for exercise — aim for three to five sessions a week, 20 to 30 minutes each time.
- Include both cardio and strength-training in your routine.
- Try exercising before you go to work — it's a great way to kick-start your day.
- Cross-train to reduce your chance of injury and ensure that your body gets a total workout — if you run, try yoga; if you swim, try cycling.



stairs burns more calories than taking an escalator or a lift. If you need to talk to a colleague, walk over to their desk, instead of emailing. These choices may not seem like much but, in the long run, they can make quite a difference.

## Finding The Right Level

To make sure that you are getting enough aerobic exercise, doctors suggest calculating your maximum heart rate, and exercise at a level of intensity that is equivalent to 60 to 85 per cent of your maximum heart rate. Calculating your maximum heart rate is easy: just subtract your age in years from 220. For example, a 20 year-old should target a maximum heart rate of 200.

Keeping your heart rate at a certain level of intensity also helps you avoid over-exercising. “Too much exercise does not benefit the body,” says Dr Sim. According to a study published in the *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, overly-intensive training schedules and extreme endurance competitions can actually damage the heart.

One big misconception about exercise is that it can be bad for a woman’s fertility. This is a myth. While over-exercising isn’t good for anyone, says Dr Sim, exercise itself cannot cause a woman to become infertile — female infertility is usually due to other reasons. **LW**

## EAT RIGHT, STAY FIT

**Fitness and nutrition go hand in hand. You need to make sure that you have enough protein in your diet in order to build strength and to put on muscle. “Protein is the essential nutrient that muscles need in order to grow and repair themselves,” says Mr Won Tin Chiang, Senior Dietitian, Clinical Services, National Healthcare Group Polyclinics.**

**The average 20-something needs about 1.2 to 2g of protein per kilogramme of body weight, says Mr Won. Opt for skinless chicken breast, fish and tofu. Protein shakes are another source, but exercise caution and do not take too much. “High protein intake may be unsafe for individuals with abnormal kidney function,” cautions Mr Won.**

**Also, excess protein intake can leach calcium from your bones, and this can lead to osteoporosis. Mr Won suggests that if you wish to supplement your diet with whey-based protein shakes, it’s best to consult a dietitian first.**

activity that appeals to you — chances are, if you find it fun, you will want to keep doing it.

“Choose exercises that are enjoyable,” says Dr Evan Sim, family physician and Deputy Chief Medical Information Officer of National Healthcare Group Polyclinics. “Establish a good routine and try not to over-exercise.”

The important thing, he adds, is to start slow and gradually build up your fitness level. “Listen to your body and only increase your exercise regime when you feel ready. Generally, you should exercise three to five times a week, for 20 to 30 minutes each time.” And if you have joint problems, try taking up swimming or cycling instead. “These exercises are non-weight-bearing, and tend not to affect the joints,” says Dr Sim.

If you have trouble finding time to set aside for exercise, think about just increasing the level of activity in your day-to-day life. Take the stairs whenever possible — walking up each flight of

## FITNESS FADS

**If your current exercise routine has become, well, a little too routine, try one of these hot new activities to help you work up a sweat. Not only are they fun, they are a great way to meet fellow fitness-minded people.**

### PARKOUR

Also known as free running, this sport doesn’t require any specialised equipment and can be practised anywhere. In Parkour, the objective is to move from one place to another, negotiating the obstacles in between. All you need is a good pair of running shoes and some derring-do. A2 Movements runs teaser Parkour workshops for those of you who would like a slightly more formal introduction to the sport.

▶ [www.a2movements.com](http://www.a2movements.com)

### YOGAFLY

The latest addition to the yoga family, YogaFly uses a special

fabric harness that lets you move deeper into poses without putting unnecessary stress on your joints. If you’ve always wanted to try a headstand but were too scared of falling over, this might be the class for you.

▶ [www.upsidemotion.com](http://www.upsidemotion.com)

### ZUMBA

Zumba is a Latin-inspired dance movement that has taken the world by storm — famous fans of the sport include Jennifer Lopez, Madonna and more. It promises to burn up to 500 calories per 45-minute session, but you won’t notice because you’ll be busy having way too much fun.

▶ <http://fiestadefitness.com>

