

## **Teenage girls - getting them active**

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Physical activity is important for everybody, including all teenagers, but especially for girls who are generally less active than boys the same age. As teens juggle the transition from primary school to high school there are other pressures that come with it – socially, at home, and at school.

Issues such as body image, the onset of menstruation, and general feelings of insecurity about the changing body can surface in these years. Physical activity sometimes takes a back seat to other priorities. However, physical activity is an important part of health and wellbeing, and girls should remain active as they grow up.

### **Rewards of physical activity**

Some of the many benefits of regular physical activity for teenage girls include:

- Increased strength, stamina and flexibility
- Helps maintain a healthy body weight
- Improves fitness and heart health
- Decreased incidence of stress and depression
- Increased self-esteem
- Positive body image
- Opportunities to have fun and interact with friends and family

### **Common barriers**

Some of the reasons why teenage girls might avoid exercise and sport include:

- Copying the behaviour of their physically inactive parents
- Lack of energy due to poor physical fitness
- The myth that you can't be 'feminine' and play sport
- Peer pressure, such as having friends who don't exercise or play sport
- Lack of basic skills (such as throwing and catching a ball)
- Fear of feeling incompetent on the field
- Fear of looking silly in front of other people, especially peers
- Fear of being teased or mocked by other players for being unskilled
- Previous bad experiences during physical education class (such as teasing from peers)
- Embarrassment about wearing sporting uniforms (such as bathers or short skirts).

### **Tips for parents**

Teenage girls should do at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. This can be built up throughout the day with a variety of activities. Being physically active doesn't mean you have to do competitive sport, or go to the gym – any physical activity is good for you. To reap the greatest benefits, physical activity should be done at a moderate to vigorous intensity.

In addition to building physical activity into your day, also think about reducing the amount of 'sedentary' activities you do (things done lying or sitting down). Limiting the amount of television you watch or computer activity to less than two hours each day may be helpful.

Tips on how to help your daughter develop a more positive attitude towards physical activity include:

- Talk about it – ask what bothers her about exercise. Understanding the reasons why your daughter avoids exercise is important because it can help you discuss possible solutions. For example, if she is shy of revealing her body, don't suggest that she try swimming. Instead, pick an activity that can be performed wearing tracksuit pants and a T-shirt.
- Be a role model – don't just watch, be active yourself. Go for a swim, walk, play tennis. Invite her to exercise with you. Go for a walk together or enrol in a class that appeals to both of you
- Watch women's sports – attend sporting matches together or watch on television. Show her that sport isn't a male domain.
- Provide support – offer to drive your daughter (and her friend) to the park. Teach her the skills, such as throwing and catching a ball and explain the rules and jargon of different sports.
- Have fun – inactive girls tend to think of exercise as boring hard work. Try to show her that exercise can be fun. Try out different things such as dance or rollerblading.
- Keep it simple – emphasise that physical activity is not just sport or going to the gym and that it doesn't need to be a structured activity. It can be integrated into daily routines through walking, using stairs, walking the dog, cycling and so on.
- Build exercise into your family routine. For example, weekend activities could include bushwalking or throwing a Frisbee.
- Discover her potential interests. For example, if she likes watching tennis on television, perhaps she would like to take a few lessons herself.
- Talk to the school's physical education teacher or contact your local council for information on physical activities in your neighbourhood.
- Talk to her friends and their parents and suggest that some of the girls enrol in an activity (such as a dance class) at the same time. This social element will help to boost the 'fun factor' and encourage enthusiasm for regular exercise.
- Consider involving her in same-sex rather than co-ed physical activities. Teenage girls are keenly aware of boys. In a co-ed class, your daughter may worry that the boys are judging her body or her sporting skills, which may dampen her enthusiasm for the activity.
- Don't focus on physical appearance outcomes, and let girls know that health is not defined by body size. While physical activity is an important part of health, being skinny is not. People of a variety of weights and body shapes can be healthy.

### **Praise is important**

Parents have a profound influence on their children. Take advantage of your influence and praise your daughter for being physically active. Positive feedback will reinforce the exercise habit. You could consider giving her little rewards, such as clothing or movie tickets, whenever she reaches a health or fitness goal. The aim is to make her feel good for being physically active. Soon, the benefits of exercise – such as weight management and increased self-esteem – will make her seek out exercise opportunities on her own.