

# Staying Fit at Home

Fitness is much more than physical strength and endurance; it also entails nutritious eating, proper sleep and mental/spiritual health.

**By Matthew D. Hansen, DPT, MPT, BSPTS**

**I'VE KNOWN MANY** weightlifters with a body chiseled like an Olympian who couldn't jog half a lap around a track without getting winded and having to stop. I've also known many long-distance runners who couldn't open a kitchen jar lid because they lacked the grip strength. We've probably all experienced how difficult it is to function well when we don't give our bodies and minds enough rest and nutrition. Can someone really say they are "fit" when they pay attention to only one or two aspects of their health, and neglect the others? No. Fitness is about finding balance involving all aspects of our health.

If there's one thing that has probably been challenged above all else during the pandemic, it's balance. Social distancing has closed gyms; reduced the frequency of trips to the supermarket for fresh food; kept us from friends, family, work and favorite activities outside of the home; and resulted in even more screen time. When combined with the barrage of daily negative news and economical-political uncertainty, mental fitness has also been challenged for many. Home might feel more like a prison than a sanctuary.



## Establishing a Routine with Proper Sleep

The first secret to maintaining balance and staying fit is establishing a routine, although flexibility and a touch of spontaneity are also important components. A good routine begins with observing an appropriate sleep schedule. Sleep is important not only for mental acuity, but to allow the body to repair itself and produce infection-fighting antibodies and protective cytokines. A good night's rest also allows us to reset our mind and body to prepare to face another day.

By way of personal confession, this is probably the area of fitness I struggle with the most. I need to wake up by a certain time most days, but because there always seem to be more items on my to-do list than there are hours in the day, sleep is often sacrificed to work. Consequently, as the week marches on, I progressively become less productive later in the day until I eventually crash into the weekend.

Fortunately, there are things I'm already doing to improve my sleep routine. If something needs to get done before the next day, I try to eliminate unnecessary noise and other distractions. I can work well with music, but not with television. If there's a program I really want to see, I can record it or watch it later. If I find it difficult to shut my brain off when it's time to go to bed — which is not unusual — I've found certain herbal teas and soothing instrumental music help. Like all good habits, establishing a healthy sleep schedule takes discipline, but it can make a big difference.

## Good Eating Habits and Adequate Hydration

To establish a good routine, you must know your body and not be afraid to be honest with yourself. For example, I've learned that although exercise is critical to my fitness level, if I exercise too late in the evening, it makes it more difficult for me to fall asleep. So, I'm a morning exerciser.

Understanding your nutritional needs is also essential. Most people have an idea of what it means to eat healthfully, but many people don't. Some people have used the opportunity of being home more during the pandemic to cook and eat better, while others have increased their intake of take-out and canned or frozen foods high in preservatives. When stressed or bored, some people eat more or indulge in cravings. During the pandemic, junk food has become particularly accessible, oftentimes just feet away for those confined to home.

When I'm traveling for business or when I'm home alone on the rare occasion when the rest of the family is traveling without me, I don't tend to eat as well. It's not that I eat bad food, but I often don't eat as frequently as I should. I skip meals more and don't eat the wholesome snacks I need to keep my blood sugar level in check.

Eating healthy and drinking water and other clear liquids becomes even more important when regularly exercising. Our bodies need nutrients to function, and when we wait too long to eat between meals, thinking can become clouded, energy levels deteriorate and our bodies generally don't function as well. If we practice poor eating habits for too long, it can also affect our metabolism and immune systems.

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I'm someone who almost always must feel like I'm being productive, and cooking doesn't fill that need for me unless I'm cooking for someone else. So, when I was single, cold cereal and peanut butter sandwiches were my standard go-to. Even though my carb-loaded friends of years past are still a tempting meal on the fly, as I've matured and become more informed, I understand I need to care for myself more thoughtfully. I still feel the need to be productive, so I now look forward to cooking with my kids when they are around, or I listen to a favorite podcast, watch an episode of a favorite program on my phone or practice a foreign language. Then the time becomes something to look forward to rather than to avoid. It's certainly better than sitting on the couch. When fresh produce is available, I enjoy attempting new ethnic food recipes or experimenting with my own concoctions of whatever is in the fridge and needs to be used before it spoils.

## Physical Exercise

Physical conditioning is usually what most people think of first when they hear the word fitness, but to be most effective, the other components of fitness already discussed (proper sleep and nutrition) are also necessary.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced those who once relied on the local health club for exercise to find or invent other ways to keep active. It has also demonstrated that one

of the most important motivators for exercise, socialization, does not always have to be in-person to be effective. Virtually any exercise at the gym can be replicated at home, and technology has found new ways to bring friends and workout partners together. For example, peer Zoom exercise groups and virtual classes have popped up across the world. If you're shy, and not ready to model your new yoga pants to the world, it's easy to turn your camera off.

Although there are some amazing new exercise equipment and technology solutions for home use, their superiority compared to much simpler and less-expensive solutions is highly contestable. If you can afford it and having the latest new thing helps to motivate you, go for it! Otherwise, I recommend considering what tools you already have in the home such as a chair, bottom step, broom and gallon of water. As a home health physical therapist, I've created many thorough exercise routines for people using items from their pantry or utility closet.

To avoid injury or causing other harm, it's important to have a basic understanding of the principles of exercise or, better yet, consult with someone who specializes in exercise prescription prior to initiating new activities. Therefore, the following examples of household items that can be used for different strengthening activities are not presented as part of a specifically recommended program, but rather as an illustration of how readily and inexpensively exercise can be adapted in the home setting.

**Stairs.** The stairs are one of the most versatile pieces of equipment you likely have in your home. For safety reasons, I recommend performing most activities from the bottom step while holding onto the rail. Several exercises that can be performed from the stairs include:

- Side-dips (aka stair squats): While standing sideways on the bottom step (perpendicular to the stair tread), squat and lower the downslope side of your body until your non-weight-bearing foot touches the floor below. Use the strength of your upslope leg to raise your body and repeat.
- Step-ups: With your body facing toward the staircase, step up onto the bottom step, step down and repeat.
- Stair dips (aka triceps dips): Sit down on the second or third step from the bottom of the staircase (the taller you are, the higher the step needs to be). Position your hands so they are next to your thighs, pushing down into the step. Walk your feet out on the floor and lift your buttocks off the step. Hinging at the elbow, lower your body as far as you can go or until your arms form a 90-degree angle.




- Incline or decline push-ups
- Stair lunges
- Heel raises
- Stretches (hamstring and calf)
- Bear crawl or upright stair climbing for a cardio workout

**Chairs.** A stable chair can be just as handy as stairs when it comes to exercises, perhaps even more so, because exercises for most parts of the body can be modified for a sitting position to benefit those who need more stability or experience pain while standing on their feet. Chairs can also provide great support for standing exercises.

**Homemade weights.** There are many options when homemade weights are needed for resistance exercises. Water bottles or soup cans are perfect for light-weight, high-repetition exercises to build endurance or strengthen muscles prone to tendonitis.

When greater weight is needed, try water or milk gallons, a bottle of laundry detergent or any other plastic bottle that has a handle. Reusable canvas or plastic grocery bags can be loaded with all sorts of items to vary the weight, and then either lifted by hand or slipped by their handles over a broom, mop or PVC pipe to create an impromptu barbell. Just be careful not to let the bags slip off the barbell, or to overload the bags so that they break and spill the items onto the floor — or your feet! If you purchase PVC caps from the hardware store, you can create weights by filling segments of pipe with water, sand or gravel.

**Cushions or pillows.** Performing standing exercises while positioned on a cushion or pillow can challenge your balance and strengthen your postural muscles. To make things more difficult, try standing on one leg or closing your eyes while lightly placing one finger against a structure for support. You can also use cushions and pillows for isometric exercises (e.g., squeezing a pillow between your knees or pushing a body part against the couch to the count of five).



*Cardio exercise.* Many people in the gym and at home neglect the importance of cardio (aerobic) exercise, which should be performed three to five times a week based on intensity (i.e., 30 minutes of moderate activity five days a week or at least 25 minutes of vigorous activity three days a week).

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Depending on where you live, getting a cardio workout at home can be challenging during the winter months, especially if there is snow on the ground and you don't have a stationary bike or treadmill. However, it's not impossible.

Any of the exercises already mentioned can be converted to a cardio exercise if the intensity and duration are sufficient. This may mean you need to reduce the resistance (weight) to sustain the activity long enough to have a beneficial effect on your cardio system. The key is your target heart rate, which can be tracked via a fitness tracking device or calculated as 50 percent – 85 percent of your maximum safe heart rate (i.e.,  $220 - \text{your age}$ ). So, for a 60-year-old, maximum safe heart rate is  $220 - 60 = 160$  beats per minute (bpm). At a 50 percent exertion level, target exercise heart rate would be 80 bpm. At an 85 percent exertion level, target exercise heart rate would be 136 bpm.

Climbing stairs for aerobic exercise has already been mentioned. Based on your current fitness level, walking around the home for the allotted time, with or without an assistive device, may be sufficient. Hopefully, you've begun to see there are many tools within reach in your own home to help you achieve and maintain physical fitness. As you begin to safely experiment with other options, you'll likely surprise yourself as you begin seeing otherwise ordinary household items in a completely different light.

As with the other components of fitness, the secret to your success will lie in the physical routine you create. Some people choose to exercise at an established time every day or on certain days of the week. Another effective


model, particularly for those who need to conserve energy throughout the day, is to establish a routine of intermittent exercise. An example of this plan might include performing a set of heel raises every time you go up the stairs of your home and a set of side-steps every time you come down. Another example might be performing a set of chair exercises every time a commercial comes on during the program you're watching or walking around the home just before or after meals while listening to a favorite podcast.

## Mental/Spiritual Health

If you were to incorporate the other three fundamentals of fitness into your life — proper sleep, healthy eating/adequate hydration and physical exercise — you would likely already be more mentally fit than you would be otherwise because each of these components supports our mental and spiritual well-being.

I use the descriptor “spiritual” in a broader sense than the term “religious.” There are many people who are areligious who would still consider themselves to be spiritual. To me, being spiritual describes someone who is aware of — or seeking — their place in the universe, and at least acknowledges some interconnectivity among living things, which also means our actions can have an impact, for better or worse, on those around us.

The COVID-19 pandemic along with social distancing has challenged the mental health of many — if not most — of us to the nth degree. As we move forward into a future that may still look somewhat uncertain, it's important to reestablish and maintain healthy recreational outlets and maintain our social ties with others, even when it must be virtually. Whether those experiences are planned or spontaneous, big or small, they need to be regular, and they need to be a priority in our lives.

Be healthy, be fit and be well! 

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