

The Value of Physical Conditioning

By Lisa Schilling RN

Both cardiovascular and resistance training are forms of physical conditioning. This is a key component of total wellness. It refers to an intentional program of building **strength, endurance and stamina**.

Conditioning allows your body to work as it was designed to and at its optimum level. It is important to understand how the body works and what benefit you can receive from a proper conditioning program. The concept of conditioning seems lost on most Americans. In our instant gratification society, the act of daily self-discipline for positive future outcomes we may not see right away, is a tough sell for many people.

By learning more about what makes the body work, you can begin to fully grasp the importance of gradual and regular conditioning. Exercise affects your heart and lungs. The heart is a muscle, but not the lungs. The lungs depend upon the movement of the diaphragm for the amount of air they can take in. The body needs oxygen for many functions. This includes providing energy by burning the food we eat for fuel.

Air is inhaled into the lungs where the oxygen is removed. It is then forced into small, balloon-like red blood cells. From there it is sent through the bloodstream to the heart, where it is pumped throughout the entire system. **Good oxygen exchange is essential to wellbeing.** The muscles, nerves and other tissues are directly affected by it. One objective of exercise is to strengthen muscles and improve tone. The main objective of any conditioning program is to increase the capacity of the heart and lungs (cardiopulmonary system). This allows oxygen to be fed more freely and easily through the cardiopulmonary system. This in itself will improve the muscular network so physical acts can be performed more freely and with ease.

Even involuntary systems such as the digestive system can begin to function more efficiently. Some types of foods are burned up more easily than others. Any

excess food fat can linger in the bloodstream and impair its flow. That dangerous fat known as **cholesterol** will harden to the interior walls of the arteries and narrow them. When this happens blood flow is reduced, or even stopped if the artery becomes blocked. This leads to what is called **arteriosclerosis** or hardening of the arteries. The heart and brain must have oxygen to perform properly. Any impairment of blood flow that denies the heart or brain of oxygen can cause a heart attack or stroke.

Regular physical conditioning can increase the capacities of the heart, lungs and the entire vascular system. Greater capacity allows more blood to be carried throughout the body to the tissues and muscles. With greater blood flow, more oxygen can be utilized by the body. A well conditioned person reduces their heart rate and blood pressure as a result of the heart not having to work so hard.

Testing your resting heart rate and recovery heart rate are two ways to monitor your cardiopulmonary fitness and to see the REAL benefits of your efforts. Studies show that the maximum oxygen intake of moderately active men decreases from the age of 20, by almost eight percent in 10 years. Subsequently it decreases 16 percent by 40 years of age, 26 percent by 50 years of age, and 35 percent by 60 years of age. This natural decline of oxygen intake makes actively improving cardiopulmonary function even more important as you get older. Improving your cardiopulmonary fitness allows the body to function more efficiently and reduces your risk for “age related” disease. The dreaded, “My ‘parts’ are wearing out syndrome!”

All muscles can be made more limber, larger and stronger. The heart is a muscle and can be **conditioned** to do more work with less effort. This saves thousands of heart beats each year and in theory, would add more years to your life. Your heart can wear out from being overworked. It has been said, “People do not die so much as they gradually kill themselves.” Age comes not only from years but from neglect. Perhaps

bodies do not “wear out” from overwork as much as they “rust out” from inactivity. Years of inactivity will do more damage to your body than the *years* themselves. It is true that certain capabilities decline with age, but they can be greatly affected by regular conditioning. There are many fit “older” people and many “unfit” younger ones. You do not slow down suddenly in one day. Most people gradually slow down each day upon day of their adult life. You have the choice to start speeding up again and getting more out of the life you have left.

It is important to keep your body strong and flexible. Working your muscles through activity will stretch and strengthen them. The more limber you are and the stronger your muscles, the better able you will be to perform the activities you want to do. It will even improve your posture. Strength creates motion but flexibility permits it. Balancing the two is part of your conditioning plan.

Fitness is a state of being, not one of age. The determining factor is not how *many* years you have lived, but how you have lived *during* your years. It is this that will have a greater influence on your level of fitness and general wellness.