Measuring Progress

One of the best ways to know if changes to your lifestyle are making an impact is to keep track of your progress. Knowing that changing your habits is truly making a difference is great motivation to keep you moving in the direction of a healthy, active lifestyle. By keeping track of your journey, you're creating a road map that will point you in the right direction, even if you've made some wrong turns. It may not be a perfect journey, but it's your journey and you will have something to show for it.

Performing Self-Assessments

As you increase your physical activity, your physical fitness will improve. Your body chemistry will be changing, and this will affect how you feel, act, and look even before visible weight loss. There are several self-assessments that you can do to monitor changes in your aerobic fitness and body composition that you can do in the privacy of your own home.

Assessing Heart Rate

Your heart rate, or pulse, indicates the number of times your heart beats in a given period of time. A normal heart rate changes throughout the day and is the lowest after you've been sleeping for over six hours, getting gradually higher throughout the day.

Like any other muscle, your heart becomes stronger as you become more physically fit. It becomes more efficient, pumping more blood with each beat, so your resting heart rate will decrease as your physical fitness increases. (This is called increased stroke volume, which means there is more blood with each beat.)

Taking Your Resting Heart Rate. The best time to take your resting heart rate is when it is the lowest, before you get out of bed in the morning.

- Feel for your pulse wherever a large artery lies near the surface—temple, neck, wrist, or on the chest near the heart.
- Count your pulse for a full 60 seconds, or count it for 30 seconds and multiply by 2. This is your beats per minute (bpm).
- Measure your resting heart rate over three mornings and find the average.

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As a general rule, a low resting heart rate indicates good physical fitness, although there are always exceptions. (Some people with poor fitness have a low resting heart rate, and some athletes might even have high resting heart rates). Some medications, such as beta-blockers, will also cause a lower resting heart rate.

Target Resting Heart Rate—Men	Target Resting Heart Rate—Women
Superior: 48-55 bpm Excellent: 56-65 bpm Good: 66-79 bpm Fair: 80-90 bpm Poor: Over 90 bpm	Superior: 53-60 bpm Excellent: 61-70 bpm Good: 71-84 bpm Fair: 85-95 bpm Poor: Over 95 bpm

bpm = beats per minute

Taking Your Heart Rate During Physical Activity. Your heart rate during physical activity indicates the intensity of the activity you are doing.

- Take your pulse at the neck, temple, wrist, or heart.
- Count the number of times your heart beats in 10 seconds and multiply by 6 to determine your beats per minute.
- Begin counting immediately when you stop the physical activity since your heart rate begins to decrease as soon as you stop.

Make sure to move around while taking your pulse to avoid having blood pool in your legs, which will cause lightheadedness.

Your recommended maximum heart rate will depend on your age and your body mass index (BMI; your doctor can tell you what that is, or you can figure it out by visiting a website such as the National Institutes of Health BMI calculator: https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm).

BMI	Target Heart Rate*
30-40 kg/m^2	80% of maximum HR
40-45 kg/m^2	70% of maximum HR
45-50 kg/m^2	60% of maximum HR
>50 kg/m^2	50% of maximum HR

BMI = body mass index; HR = heart rate.

*Maximum HR is 220 minus your age.

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Assessing Your Physical Fitness

Physical fitness takes many forms: cardiovascular, endurance, muscle strength, and flexibility. Different exercises target different types of fitness, and some target more than one. All activity is good, but the activities that increase your cardiovascular endurance are particularly beneficial because they can reduce the risk of chronic diseases including heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and some cancers.

One easy method of self-assessment is a simple walking test, which is typically a safe non-strenuous exercise that most people can do. You will need a stopwatch or a watch with a second hand and a walking path or course that will take you about five minutes to complete (you don't have to know the exact distance).

- Walk the course.
- Time how long it takes you to complete the course to the nearest second.
- Take your pulse for 10 seconds immediately upon finishing, then multiply by 6 to determine your beats per minute.
- Record both how long it took you to complete the walk and your heart rate.
- After a few weeks, repeat the test exactly.

If you have been consistent about increasing your physical activity, you should notice changes such as a decrease in walking time and/or a lower pulse immediately following activity.

Tip: Before starting, make sure you stretch, wear comfortable shoes and clothing, and practice taking your pulse following the instructions above. Avoid extreme cold or heat, and stop if you experience any unusual pain or discomfort.

Assessing Your Physical Progress

While tracking your progress on the inside, it is just as important to see what is happening on the outside. Changes may come slowly, so don't get discouraged.

Body Weight. Resist the temptation to weigh yourself daily; weight doesn't change more than one pound a day, even during rapid weight loss, so daily weighing can be discouraging. Instead weigh yourself once a week using the following steps:

- Place scale on hard, flat surface (not carpeting).
- Weigh in the morning after emptying your bladder/bowels.
- Weigh yourself naked before showering.
- Record your weight to the nearest half pound.

Measuring Progress

Body circumference. Another way to track your progress is to measure your body circumference. You'll need a flexible measuring tape (such as a fabric measuring tape), and you should stand in front of a mirror to help you determine if the tape is positioned properly.

- Stand very straight with your feet together
- Do not compress the skin with the tape measure
- Take 3 measurements to the nearest quarter inch in the following areas:
    - **Waist:** The level of your natural waist should be midway between the lower ribs and the top of your hipbone. Take the waist measurement with the abdomen relaxed, at the end of a normal breath.
    - **Hip:** Place the tape measure around your hips at the level of maximum (widest) extension of the buttocks.
    - **Chest:** Measure at nipple level between inhaling and exhaling.
    - **Upper Arm:** Measure around the right biceps midway between the shoulder and the elbow with elbow extended.
    - **Thigh:** Measure at the largest area just below the gluteal fold.

The most important of these measurements, which your healthcare team also uses to monitor your health, is the waist circumference. People with larger waists (especially in relation to the rest of their body) have a higher risk of heart disease and diabetes.

In Summary

The best way to know that you're on the right track is to keep track! Taking self-assessments on a regular basis to monitor changes in your heart rate, physical fitness, and body will not only serve as a road map for your path to better health but as motivation to keep going as your numbers improve.