



Feature Column

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Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

A New Wonder Drug Called Physical Activity

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If there were a wonder drug invented that could reduce stress, control weight, lower blood pressure, improve self-esteem, fight depression and make everyday tasks easier. Such a drug would be touted as a great medical breakthrough and more than likely cost a pretty penny, too. Well, help is here, and it's free. The miracle drug is physical activity and we all need to begin taking a daily dose—especially our children.

According to the 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, only 62 percent of adolescents grade 9-12 engaged in vigorous activity (participated in physical activity for at least 20 minutes that made them sweat and breathe hard on three or more of the past seven days). An alarming sixty-four percent of children in Arkansas are not enrolled in a physical education class.

What is the result of all of this inactivity? The two primary concerns are obesity and diabetes. Nationally, in 1999-2000, 15 percent of children ages 6–11 and 16 percent of adolescents ages 12–19 were overweight. Diabetes is diagnosed in our children in increasing numbers. Both of these conditions are risk factors for heart disease.

Because kids spend most of their days at school, it is recommended that schools make the most of

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their resources for promoting healthier lifestyles. Parents can make a difference at home by more closely examining how active their children are before, during and after school and spending time in physical activity with them.

Health benefits can be gained from 20 to 30 minutes of physical activity three or more times a week and some type of muscle strengthening activity and stretching at least twice a week. However, a recent report from the Institute of Medicine says an even greater benefit is associated with an hour of physical activity daily. If you are unable to do this level of activity, you can still gain health benefits by accumulating 30 minutes or more of moderate-intensity physical activity a day, at least five times a week. Moderate-intensity activities can be both beneficial and fun.

- Is your dog getting on the heavy side? Grab the leash and the kids and take a brisk walk.
- Save money and expend those teenage calories by getting your daughter to invite her friends over for a “scrub the car” party. Instead of pizza, serve fresh fruit and low calorie dips.
- Is the house in need of a good cleaning? Get the kids busy tidying up and burning calories by pushing the vacuum and mopping the floor.

All too often children come home from school or wake up on Saturday mornings only to sit in front of the TV or battle the bad guys in video games. The only bones and muscles doing any work are the fingers. Parents can help their children adopt healthier, more active habits by simply encouraging their kids to get on their feet. The greatest benefits from a fitness program are seen when a person goes from being inactive to active, not whether someone walks one mile or five miles.

Colder weather is on the way and while it’s more difficult to run and jump inside during the winter months, children can still stretch their bodies. A body tangling game of Twister is always fun (for kids and adults). Even when it’s cold outside, an invigorating hike can do wonders for children and parents.

Parents can help children be more physically active by:

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- Asking what physical activities the child likes to do, and then helping him or her do it
- Making physical activity a family affair
- Encouraging children to join intramural teams
- Monitoring the quantity of TV, computer and video games
- Encouraging schools to require physical activity and offering assemblies and field trips centered around active behaviors
- Advocating the development of safe walking and biking trails and neighborhood parks

Make a commitment today to help yourself and your children live longer, healthier lives. Arkansas is making changes to promote physical activity. We are seeing more sidewalks in neighborhoods so children and adults will have a safe place to walk. Parks and walking trails are available to individuals and families for any number of physical activities. Get fit and support physical activity in your community.

For information regarding physical activity and fitness, contact Kirt Bierbaum, Arkansas Governor's Council on Fitness, at (501) 671-1508.

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