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Move the Mediterranean Way

Physical Activity for Everyday Health

A practical guide to active living within the MEDLifestyle approach



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Disclaimer

This e-book is an educational resource intended for health promotion and public awareness. It does not replace individual medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Readers with medical conditions, mobility limitations, pain, or exercise-related concerns should consult a qualified health professional before starting a new physical activity program.

The recommendations presented in this e-book are based on international public-health guidance and peer-reviewed evidence on physical activity, sedentary behavior, healthy ageing, sleep, and mental well-being.

Purpose of this e-book

To explain what physical activity is, why it matters, how much is recommended, and how movement can be integrated into everyday life in realistic, enjoyable, and sustainable ways.

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Introduction

Physical activity is one of the most accessible and evidence-based ways to improve health across the lifespan. It supports cardiovascular health, metabolic function, musculoskeletal strength, mental well-being, and healthy ageing, while physical inactivity increases the risk of noncommunicable diseases and premature death (Bull et al., 2020; World Health Organization [WHO], 2024).

In modern life, many people spend long hours sitting at work, in transport, or in front of screens. This makes the message of active living more important than ever. WHO emphasizes four practical principles that are especially useful for public education: some physical activity is better than none, more is generally better up to recommended levels, all movement counts, and sedentary time should be reduced (Bull et al., 2020).

Within the MEDLifestyle framework, physical activity should not be viewed as a narrow fitness goal or as a punishment for eating. It is better understood as part of a broader culture of health: walking more, sitting less, using active transport where possible, spending time outdoors, maintaining strength and balance, and building routines that can be sustained for years rather than days.

Key message

You do not need to become an athlete to benefit from movement. Walking more, sitting less, and building regular habits already improve health.

1. What physical activity really means

Physical activity includes any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure. It is broader than formal exercise and much broader than sport. Walking, climbing stairs, cleaning, carrying bags, cycling, gardening, stretching, and playing with children all count as physical activity (Bull et al., 2020).

This distinction matters because many people believe that movement only counts when it happens in a gym. In reality, daily movement accumulated across the day can contribute meaningfully to health, even when it is not part of a formal training program.

It is also important to distinguish physical activity from sedentary behavior. Sedentary behavior refers to waking time spent sitting, reclining, or lying down with very low energy expenditure, such as prolonged television viewing, desk work, or long car travel. High sedentary time has been associated with poorer health outcomes, including less favorable cardiometabolic profiles and poorer function-related outcomes (Saunders et al., 2020).

Myth Only gym workouts count as real physical activity.

Fact All movement counts. Walking, cleaning, cycling, gardening, climbing stairs, and home-based exercises can all contribute to better health (Bull et al., 2020).

2. How much physical activity is recommended?

For adults, WHO recommends at least 150–300 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, or 75–150 minutes per week of vigorous-intensity activity, or an equivalent combination of both. In addition, adults should perform muscle-strengthening activities involving major muscle groups on two or more days per week (Bull et al., 2020; WHO, 2020).

Children and adolescents should average at least 60 minutes per day of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity across the week, mostly aerobic, with muscle- and bone-strengthening activities included on at least three days per week. Older adults should follow the same basic targets as adults and should also include multicomponent activities emphasizing balance and functional strength, especially when mobility is reduced or fall risk is relevant (Bull et al., 2020).

These recommendations are not meant to intimidate readers. Activity can be accumulated in shorter sessions and distributed across the day. For someone who is currently inactive, beginning with short walks, home exercises, or stair use is still meaningful.

Summary Table 1. WHO physical activity recommendations across age groups

Population group	Recommended activity
Children and adolescents (5–17 years)	At least 60 minutes per day of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity, mostly aerobic; muscle- and bone-strengthening activities at least 3 days per week.
Adults (18–64 years)	At least 150–300 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, or 75–150 minutes per week of vigorous activity, or an equivalent combination; muscle-strengthening activities on 2 or more days per week.
Older adults (65+ years)	Same as adults, plus added emphasis on balance, coordination, and functional strength, especially for those with reduced mobility.
General message	Some activities are better than none. All movement counts. Sitting less also matters.

Practical tip

One simple way to reach 150 minutes per week is to walk briskly for 30 minutes on 5 days per week. This can also be split into three 10-minute walks per day.

3. Physical activity and mental well-being

The case for physical activity is not limited to physical health. A large and growing body of evidence shows that movement is also strongly linked with mental well-being.

An overview of systematic reviews published in 2023 concluded that physical activity is highly beneficial for improving symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress across a wide range of adult populations, including healthy adults, people with mental health conditions, and people living with chronic diseases (Singh et al., 2023).

A 2024 umbrella review found that higher physical activity levels were associated with reduced risk of future depression and anxiety, including an odds ratio of 0.77 for depression and 0.71 for anxiety disorders (Rahmati et al., 2024).

Importantly, benefits can appear below the full public-health target. A 2022 systematic review and meta-analysis in JAMA Psychiatry concluded that being physically active was associated with lower risk of incident depression and that relatively small amounts of activity were associated with substantial mental health benefit (Pearce et al., 2022).

4. Physical activity, sleep, and daily functioning

Sleep is another area where physical activity appears to offer meaningful support. A 2023 systematic review concluded that regular physical activity is associated with improved sleep quality and with improvements in some sleep-related problems, including insomnia symptoms and daytime sleepiness, although effects vary depending on population, age, and exercise type (Alnawwar et al., 2023).

For public communication, this means readers can be told something scientifically fair and practically useful: regular movement may improve not only fitness, but also how people feel during the day, how quickly they fall asleep, and how refreshed they feel afterwards.

Physical activity should not be presented as a guaranteed cure for every sleep difficulty, but as an evidence-supported lifestyle factor that can contribute to better sleep health over time (Alnawwar et al., 2023; WHO, 2024).

Practical tip

A short walk during daylight hours, regular movement across the week, and less evening sedentary time may support healthier sleep routines when combined with good sleep hygiene.

5. Strength, balance, and healthy ageing

Public discussion of physical activity often focuses too narrowly on walking or aerobic exercise. However, the evidence makes it clear that muscle-strengthening activity also matters.

A 2022 systematic review and meta-analysis of cohort studies found that muscle-strengthening activities were associated with a 10% to 17% lower risk of all-cause mortality, cardiovascular disease, total cancer, diabetes, and lung cancer. The greatest risk reduction for several outcomes appeared around 30 to 60 minutes per week of muscle-strengthening activity (Momma et al., 2022).

For older adults, balance and functional movement are especially important. A systematic review conducted to inform the WHO guidelines concluded that exercise prevents falls in older adults, and earlier meta-analytic evidence found that exercise reduced the rate of falls among community-dwelling older adults by 21% overall, with larger benefits in programs that challenged balance and involved higher weekly doses (Sherrington et al., 2017, 2020).

Physical activity may also support cognitive health in later life, although the size of the association appears modest. A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis found that physical activity was associated with a lower incidence of cognitive impairment or decline and with slightly better late-life cognition (Iso-Markku et al., 2024).

6. Why sitting less matters too

A scientifically strong e-book on movement should not focus only on exercise sessions. It should also explain the health significance of sedentary time.

A 2020 overview of systematic reviews concluded that high levels of sedentary behavior are unfavorably associated with cognitive function, depression, disability, and physical health-related quality of life in adults, and that reducing or interrupting prolonged sitting may benefit body composition and cardiometabolic markers (Saunders et al., 2020).

This means that a healthy movement message should have two parts: be more active and be less sedentary. Someone who cannot yet perform structured exercise can still make meaningful progress by standing up more often, walking during breaks, reducing prolonged television time, using stairs, and building more light movement into ordinary routines.

Everyday reminder

Long periods of sitting are not neutral. Stand up regularly, stretch, and add short walking breaks during work, study, or travel whenever possible.

7. Translating science into everyday Mediterranean living

The MEDLifestyle approach becomes especially powerful when scientific guidance is translated into realistic daily habits. From a behavioral perspective, the most effective routines are often not the most intense ones, but the most repeatable ones.

The evidence that even smaller increases in activity can improve mental health and reduce risk supports a practical public-health message: start where you are, build gradually, and make movement part of the structure of daily life rather than an occasional extra (Pearce et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2025).

In practical terms, this means encouraging readers to walk short distances instead of driving, when possible, add 10-minute walks before or after meals, use stairs, include two short strengthening sessions each week, interrupt long sitting periods, and choose leisure activities that involve movement.

For older adults, it also means preserving confidence and independence through chair rises, balance practice, and functional strength work. For families, it means active outings, outdoor play, and routines that normalize movement as part of shared life.

Summary Table 2. Practical weekly examples for different lifestyles

Profile	Example weekly plan
Beginner adult	20-minute brisk walk on 4–5 days per week plus 2 short strength sessions.
Busy worker	Three 10-minute walks per day on most days, stairs when possible, and 2 short strength sessions per week.
Older adult	Comfortable walking 3–5 days per week plus chair rises, balance exercises, and light strength work.
Family routine	Shared walks after dinner several times per week, active weekend outing, and less screen-based leisure.
Sedentary office worker	Stand up every 30–60 minutes, add short walking breaks, reduce sitting time, and schedule active commuting where possible.

A good beginner week

Monday: 20-minute walk. Tuesday: 10-minute walk plus strength exercises. Wednesday: 20-minute walk. Thursday: Reduce sitting and add extra steps. Friday: 20-minute brisk walk. Saturday: Strength exercises plus short walk. Sunday: Active family or outdoor time.

Conclusion

The scientific evidence supports a simple and powerful conclusion: physical activity is one of the central pillars of a healthy life. It lowers the risk of disease and premature death, supports mood and emotional well-being, contributes to better sleep, helps preserve strength and independence, and can be beneficial even when introduced later in life.

At the same time, long periods of sedentary behavior should be reduced as much as possible. For this reason, the most useful public-health message is not to train hard, but rather to move regularly, strengthen the body, interrupt sitting, and build habits that last (Bull et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2020; WHO, 2024).

Within MEDLifestyle, physical activity should therefore be framed not as a separate topic from health, but as one of the everyday expressions of healthy living. The goal is not perfection. The goal is a sustainable pattern of movement that supports well-being throughout life.

Myth You need long workouts every day to improve health.

Fact Regular moderate activity accumulated across the week is enough to produce important health benefits. Even smaller increases are better than none (Bull et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2022).

Take-home messages

All movement counts. Some activities are better than none. Walking is a strong starting point. Strength and balance also matter. Sitting less is part of active living. Small habits repeated over time create major health benefits.

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