

Chapter 1

Fitness 101: Getting the Scoop

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting ready for your first fitness test
- ▶ Deciding among your many choices of exercise routines
- ▶ Stretching well and eating right
- ▶ Working out while pregnant, in childhood, and into your senior years

If you're reading this chapter, you've decided to get fit. (Or, like wannabe home remodelers who do nothing more than sit on the couch watching *Home Time* or *This Old House*, you're pretending to get fit by reading this book!) While transforming yourself from couch potato to buff hottie doesn't take a Ph.D. in physiology or kinesiology, you do need to follow a few rules of the road.

This chapter outlines the very basics of getting fit. If you want to find out more, each section tells you which chapters to read for all the juicy details.

Yes, This Class Has Tests

In order to best determine how to reach your fitness goals, you first need to figure out where you are, physically. And the best way to do this is to sign up for a fitness evaluation (see Chapter 2), including a full health/fitness history and other important measures, such as the following:

- ✓ **Resting heart rate:** Also known as pulse, this test measures the number of times per minute your heart beats while you're sitting down or in some other way relaxing. As you exercise more and more, your resting heart rate will likely drop.
- ✓ **Heart rate after physical activity:** Generally, you exercise for about 15 minutes on a treadmill or stationary bicycle and test your pulse. Cardio exercises (discussed in Chapter 8) can gradually lower this number.

- ✓ **Blood pressure:** This test measures how hard your heart has to work to pump blood through your blood vessels. Cardio activities (see Chapter 8) can help alleviate high blood pressure (hypertension), which can lead to health problems.
- ✓ **Percentage of body fat:** Instead of measuring how much you weigh, which doesn't necessarily indicate how fit you are, measuring your body fat tells you how much of you is fat and how much is muscle, bones, blood, organs, and other tissues. Up to a point, the lower the number, the better; reducing your body fat is often a matter of eating better (discussed in Chapter 7) and burning calories through cardio workouts (see Chapter 8) and lifting weights (see Chapter 11).
- ✓ **Strength:** This tests measures the strength of your upper body, abdominal muscles, and lower body by doing sit-ups, push-ups, leg extensions (on a weight machine), and so on. Weight lifting, described in Chapter 11, helps improve your strength.
- ✓ **Flexibility:** Because flexibility is the downfall of even the super-fit, make sure your evaluation measures the range of motion of your joints and muscles. Chapter 6 gives you the lowdown on stretching, which is one of the best ways to improve your flexibility.



Each of these tests can be done by a physician, a personal trainer, or a fitness professional working at a gym. But don't spend any time studying for them: You can't fail these tests. Think of them more as baseline measurements that help you decide where to put your emphasis: improving the health of your heart, losing weight and reducing body fat, building strength, improving your flexibility, and so on.

Choosing Your Weapon

With so many workout options available these days, you have plenty of fitness weapons from which to choose. Your workout options tend to fall into three categories, however: cardio, strength, and combination workouts. The three following sections give you a brief overview of each.

Seeing into the heart of the matter

Workouts that get your heart pumping are known as *cardio* (short for cardiovascular) exercises, and these improve the health of your heart and blood vessels. Cardio workouts also burn calories, which helps you lose weight. Check out Chapter 8 for a cardio primer.

The simplest — and, perhaps, the cheapest — cardio exercise is walking. Other popular cardio exercises include running, cycling, in-line skating, swimming, rowing, and (if you live in a snowy winter climate) snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. Chapter 10 discusses many of these outdoor cardio activities and gives you pointers for developing good techniques for each.



You don't have to brave the outdoors to get a cardio workout, however. Chapter 9 discusses indoor cardio machines, including treadmills, elliptical trainers, stationary bikes, stair-climbers, and rowing machines.

Getting buff with weights

Many men focus heavily on weight training, while some women shy away from it. The truth is that both men and women need to do some strength training (along with some cardio workouts, discussed in the preceding section, to get the heart and blood vessels into tip-top shape) for one important reason: to help burn more calories. Strange as it seems, weightlifting improves your resting metabolism, which means you turn into a fat- and calorie-burning machine. Chapter 11 shares this and many other reasons to start pumping iron.

Cardio and strength together: Two for the price of one

A few activities combine cardio and strength training into one workout. One of the most popular, circuit training (see Chapter 15), combines a cardio warm-up and cooldown with a series of weight-lifting and other strength stations. Not only can circuit training save you time, but it's also a lot of fun, because you move from station to station every 30 or 40 seconds.

Two other popular strength-cardio exercises are yoga and Pilates, which tend to focus on *core strength*, the strength and flexibility of your midsection. Discussed in Chapters 16 and 17, respectively, yoga and Pilates can be high-energy, revved-up workouts or soothing, mind-body workouts that leave you feeling refreshed.

Stretching Your Mind (and Body)

Don't let recent headlines claiming there's no correlation between stretching and injuries fool you: If you stretch properly and do it after (not before) you work out, studies show that you reduce your risk of injury. (But do take care

that you perform some flexibility movement prep before your workout — see Chapter 6.) And the bottom line is that you want to avoid injuries, because they keep you from working out as often and as intensely as you'd like. We offer you an entire chapter on stretching (see Chapter 6), plus a short chapter on avoiding common injuries (see Chapter 5).



Yoga, discussed in Chapter 16, is an excellent way to improve your flexibility.

What Are You Eating?

The link between exercise and nutrition has been clear for decades, and you're likely to have trouble improving your fitness if you make poor nutritional choices. But how do you know which choices to make? Low fat? High carb? Low carb? High protein? Low calorie? Food pyramids? Hydration? Vitamins? It's enough to make your head spin.

Knowing what to eat for optimal fitness has never been a murkier proposition. Fortunately, in Chapter 7, we guide you through the haze, giving you a clear picture of the benefits of a low-fat, low-bad-carb, high-good-carb, moderate-protein, Mediterranean-food-pyramid, lots-o-water, balanced diet. Flip to that chapter when you're ready to get the final scoop on nutrition — final for based on current scientific research, that is.

At Home or at the Gym — Choosing What's Best for You

To join or not to join, that is the fitness question everyone asks himself at some point. Joining a gym can be a big financial investment, and many people choose not to join for that reason, opting for the free activities (walking, running, cycling) available just by walking out your front door.



But gyms have plenty to offer, including the latest and greatest workout equipment, fun and invigorating classes, the opportunity to schedule time with a personal trainer, and the infectious energy of other gym members. Chapter 18 gives you step-by-step instructions for how to scout out and decide whether to join a local gym and offers a basic lesson in gym etiquette. Chapter 19 offers practical advice on deciding whether to join an exercise class or purchase a DVD to use at home.

A gym isn't the only place to use exercise equipment. If you have the money to invest in your own equipment, you can set up your own home gym in your basement, spare room, garage, or any other convenient area. Chapter 20 helps you plan your space and make the most of your fitness equipment shopping excursions; Chapter 25 offers ten low-cost fitness investments for your home.

Special Exercises for Special People

Fitness isn't only for those buff, 20-something gym gods. In fact, you can start exercising in your 80s and still reap the benefits of a healthier, longer life. And the earlier in life you start working out, the more likely it will become a lifelong habit. Chapter 23 offers some tips and advice for beginning an exercise program in your senior years.

How early is early enough? How about the womb? One study shows that women who exercise during pregnancy have leaner babies who turn into leaner kids. The benefits aren't only for the kids, however. From reducing back pain and encouraging better sleep patterns to encountering an easier delivery to slipping back into your old jeans more quickly, exercising during pregnancy offers incredible health benefits. See Chapter 21 for a short tutorial on getting and staying fit during pregnancy. For an in-depth look at pregnancy workouts, check out *Fit Pregnancy For Dummies* by Catherine Cram and Tere Stouffer Drenth (published by Wiley).

Kids, perhaps more than any other age group, understand that being active is fun. If you can tap into their natural love of activities, especially games, sports, and dancing, you can help your kids avoid the alarming rates of obesity that plague children today. Without emphasizing "exercise" or "workouts," you can introduce your child to all sorts of healthy activities that encourage a lifelong fitness. Keep the emphasis on fun, without pushing your child into competitions or activities she doesn't enjoy, and you'll help your child become an adult with a strong body and a healthy heart.

