

Chapter 1

Establishing Your Plan of Attack

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- ▶ Defining fitness
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If you're reading this chapter, you've decided to get fit. (Or like wannabe chefs whose action plan amounts to sitting on the couch watching cooking shows, you're pretending to get fit by reading this book!) Although transforming yourself from couch potato to fit, lean, exercise machine doesn't take a PhD in physiology, you'll have more success if you know what's in store.

This chapter explains what the term *fitness* really means, what's involved in becoming fit (no, you needn't quit your job and take up residence in a gym), how to get started, and how to stay motivated. We want to help make fitness a permanent and enjoyable part of your lifestyle (rather than some weird hobby, like UFO hunting, that you once took up for a month before moving on to something else).

Understanding What Fitness Means

Fitness, which some people refer to as wellness, has a lot of different meanings. You can be fit to run 5 miles, fit to hoist 200 pounds, fit to do a headstand in a yoga class or transform yourself into a pretzel. You can *look* fit — that is, lean — and not actually have much stamina, strength, flexibility, or balance. Or you can possess all those attributes but still consume doughnuts and soda for breakfast — not what we'd call a health-conscious diet. It's a rare human being who is a champ in all respects, and we don't expect that of anyone, including ourselves.

Individuals need to pick and choose which areas of fitness to focus on, the ones that make the most sense for the goals they have and the lives they lead. Still, it doesn't take that much effort to achieve a basic level of physical fitness in the five key areas: cardio, strength, flexibility, balance, and nutrition.

- ✔ **Cardio fitness:** Workouts that get your heart pumping and continuously work a lot of large muscles such as the arms, torso, and legs are known as *cardio* (short for *cardiovascular*) exercises. These activities, such as walking, cycling, and using an elliptical machine, improve your heart, lungs, blood vessels, stamina, and, to some extent, strength. Cardio workouts also burn plenty of calories, which can help you lose weight. Check out Chapters 6 through 9 for a primer on cardio exercise, both indoors and out.
- ✔ **Strength training:** Whereas some men focus on weight training to the exclusion of all other fitness activities (you may meet a buff bodybuilder who can't run a mile), some women shy away from lifting weights for fear of looking like that buff bodybuilder. In fact, for reasons we explain in Chapter 10, both men and women should incorporate some strength training into their fitness programs.
- ✔ **Flexibility:** Unlike cardio exercise and strength training, flexibility training — also known as stretching — doesn't get any glory in the fitness world unless you happen to be a gymnast or a dancer. Most people skip stretching altogether or do a few cursory toe touches and call it a day. That's because the benefits of stretching your muscles and joints aren't immediately obvious; being flexible doesn't make you slender or buff or able to outrun your teenager. So why bother? Because as you age, your joints become less mobile. Maintaining your flexibility through the exercises in Chapter 14, yoga (Chapter 16), or Pilates (Chapter 17) helps minimize your risk of falling and getting injured while allowing you to continue moving with grace and good posture even into old age.
- ✔ **Balance:** If flexibility is the forgotten stepchild of fitness, then balance is the ignored twice-removed third cousin. But like flexibility, balance is an aspect of fitness that's important when you're young and absolutely essential when you're not. A good sense of balance helps you move more fluidly and prevents unnecessary falls. Even if you have no aspirations to become a tightrope walker, doing the basic balance moves that we describe in Chapter 15 should be more than enough to help you maintain your sense of balance. Think your balance is already stellar? Take the balance tests described in that chapter and see how you rate.
- ✔ **Nutrition:** When you make wise food choices (ahem, that means nixing the peanut-butter cookie in favor of the whole-wheat toast with peanut butter), you have more energy to exercise, and you recover more quickly from your workouts. And of course, cleaning up your eating habits is the key to losing weight. But when you're faced with conflicting research reports and sneaky marketing tactics by food manufacturers, making good choices is tough. High protein or high carb? Do you really need eight glasses of water a day? How about a vitamin supplement? Chapter 3 guides you through the haze.

Setting Goals and Tracking Your Progress

You need to clarify why you want to improve your fitness. Maybe heart disease runs in your family, and you want to avoid carrying on that tradition. Maybe your kids, or grandkids, run you ragged. Maybe you're tired of spending money on new and bigger clothing every year. Whatever the reason, make sure you're doing this for yourself — not simply to please your doctor or to attempt to match your high-school-era Facebook photo.

Next, you need to set concrete fitness goals. In the following sections, we help you explore your current fitness level, set long- and short-term goals, and keep track of how you're achieving them.



Research shows that goal-setting works. In typical studies, scientists give one group of exercisers a specific goal, such as doing 60 sit-ups. Meanwhile, they tell a second group of exercisers simply, "Do your best." The exercisers with specific goals tend to have significantly more success than the "whatever" groups. This approach can work for you, too.

Assessing your current fitness level (yes, this class has tests)

To help you clarify what you want to work on — and to best determine how to reach your fitness goals — you first need to figure out where you are physically. We suggest undergoing a fitness evaluation that includes a full health/fitness history and other important measures, such as your resting heart rate, blood pressure, percentage of body fat, strength, and flexibility. We explain all these terms in Chapter 2.

Fitness tests can be done by a physician or a certified personal trainer. Or as we explain in Chapter 2, you can do many of them yourself. Don't worry: You can't fail these tests. Think of them as baseline measurements that help you decide where to put your emphasis and give you a basis for comparison a few months after you start working out.

Setting multiple goals and rewards

It's important to look at the big picture, setting long-term goals, while giving yourself smaller and more manageable stepping stones along the way. Having mini-goals makes your long-term goals seem more feasible. The following sections give you a look at the different types of goals you should set.



You give your golden retriever a doggy treat when he fetches the Frisbee, right? Be nice to yourself, too. Attach an appropriate reward to each of your goals. If you lift weights three days a week for a month or finish a 5K run, treat yourself to a massage. Sure, it's bribery, but it works. (By the way, triple-decker fudge cake isn't what we have in mind for a reward.)



You can get pretty creative with your rewards. We know a woman who put a coin in a jar for every mile she ran. When the jar was full, every few months, she counted the coins, totaled her miles, and had a little nest egg for splurging on new lipstick.

Long-term goals

Give yourself a goal for the next three to six months. Some people get really creative with their long-term goals.



Suzanne spoke to a woman in Ohio whose long-term goal was to walk to a friend's house — in Alabama. No, she didn't literally hoof it 697 miles. She charted the route on an auto-club map, and for every 20 minutes that she spent doing an aerobic exercise video, she gave herself credit for 1 mile. At the end of each week, she added up her "mileage" and used a yellow highlighter to mark the ground she covered on the map.



Make your long-term goals realistic. If you start your swimming program today, swimming the English Channel isn't a wise six-month goal. But don't be afraid to dream. Choose a goal that really sparks you, and you may be surprised by what you can accomplish.



Liz has a client who was 60 years old when he started training for a trek up Alaska's Mount McKinley. Liz eventually had the guy walking uphill for up to 90 minutes on the treadmill with a heavy pack and hiking boots. After six months of training, the man successfully completed his trek. He was the oldest one on the trip, but he wasn't the slowest.

If you're a beginner, we recommend setting moderately challenging yet still meaningful goals.

Short-term goals

Half a year is a long time to wait for feelings of success. In order to stay motivated, you need to feel a sense of accomplishment along the way. Set short-term goals for a few weeks to one month. Here are some examples:

- ✓ Take two spin classes a week for one month.
- ✓ Improve your 1-mile walk time by 20 seconds.
- ✓ Move up one weight plate on shoulder press in two weeks.
- ✓ Balance on one leg for a full minute without holding on to anything.

Immediate goals

Immediate goals refer to goals for each week, day, or workout. This way, when you walk into the gym, you don't waste any time figuring out which exercises to do. Here are examples of immediate goals:

- ✓ Spend a full 10 minutes stretching at the end of a workout.
- ✓ Do upper-body weight exercises and 20 minutes on the elliptical trainer.
- ✓ Run 2 miles.
- ✓ Bike a hilly 20-mile course.

Backup goals

You always need a Plan B in case something happens and you're not able to reach your primary goal as soon as you want to. By setting backup goals, you have a better chance of achieving something, and you don't feel like a failure if your long-term goal doesn't work out. Suppose your long-term goal is to complete a 10K run in the spring, but you sprain an ankle and have to stop running. If one of your backup goals is to strengthen your upper body, you can still keep on track while your ankle heals.



Putting it in writing

Setting goals and rewards is pretty easy; forgetting what they are is even easier. To keep yourself honest and psyched up, we suggest tracking your goals and accomplishments. Here are other ways to make a commitment and monitor your progress.

Making a goal sheet

Put your goals somewhere visible, and next to each goal, note the corresponding reward. Figure 1-1 shows a sample goal sheet that you can fill out each week. Underneath each heading, write down your goal and target date.



Suzanne knows a swimmer who writes his goals on his kickboard. Liz has a client who enters her workout goals into her computer's screen saver so that she sees them scrolling by every time she takes a break from typing.

Keeping a workout log

Tracking your workouts in a *workout log* (also called a *workout diary* or *training diary*) can help you get better results. You can look back at the end of each week and say, "Wow — look at what I did!" And you may be inspired to accomplish even more. A log also provides a reality check: You may think that you're working out four times a week only to flip through your log and discover that you've been overestimating your efforts.

Long-Term Goals	Long-Term Rewards
Backup Long-Term Goals	
Short-Term Goals	Short-Term Rewards
Weekly Goals	Weekly Rewards
Workout Goals	Daily Rewards

Figure 1-1:
Make a goal
sheet like
the one
here (or
photocopy
this one).



Test your fitness regularly and track these numbers in your workout log so you can keep track of your progress over time. Exercise gives you intangible benefits like more energy and greater self-esteem, but it also helps to translate your progress into raw numbers: how many pounds you can bench-press, how many beats your resting heart rate has dropped, how fast you can run a mile.

For your first year that you work out regularly, you may want to get tested or test yourself every three months. (You make the most noticeable improvements when you first start exercising; then progress becomes less dramatic.) After that, we suggest getting tested every six months. If you don't want to spend the time or money on a whole battery of tests, ask a certified trainer to do the part you find most motivating, such as a body-fat test or blood-pressure reading. Or use the self-tests you find in Chapter 2. You can buy a log at a bookstore, use nifty computer software to monitor your progress, or use a Web-based tracking program.

Selecting Exercises That Are Right for You

When you shop for clothes, not every outfit you try on is right for you, but when you find the perfect one, doesn't it make you feel great? The same is true of exercise. Not every activity you try, whether it's a weight circuit, a kickboxing class, or a hike through the woods, will fit you like a custom-made suit. But when you find the workout that suits your current fitness level, your budget, and your personality, it's a fantastic feeling!

This book helps guide you through the myriad options so you can make that connection. If you're pregnant, for example, you'll want to flip to Chapter 22 to find out what activities are likely to suit you best. If you're over age 50 and just starting to think about getting in shape, then the information in Chapter 24 will get you started in the right direction. If you think you could get really get passionate about running, Chapter 9 will be a page-turner.

Along with sample exercises to interest virtually every type of exerciser, we offer leads on plenty of other resources to help expand your knowledge about fitness so you can find the best exercises for you — everything from selecting equipment to choosing the right Pilates class to finding the right workout group on Twitter. And if you want to seek the help of a personal trainer to set up a safe and effective routine, check out Chapter 20.

Staying Motivated to Make Exercise a Habit

What separates people who stick with exercise from those who fall off the wagon? Tracking your progress is an excellent way to keep yourself inspired. Following are several additional tips to help you get over the hump and stay jazzed. We discuss several of these topics in detail throughout the book, but we want you to keep them in mind from the start.

Getting inspiration from others

Sometimes the strongest motivation to stick with your workouts comes from other people. Here are some ways to get some support:



- ✓ **Work out with a buddy.** If you make a plan to meet up with a friend, you're a lot less likely to blow off your workouts. Plus, time flies when you're chit-chatting as you sweat.

Liz knows a couple who decided to get in shape together. They took a class in healthy cooking, walked every morning together, and even pumped iron twice a week as a team. Each pushed and encouraged the other, and at the end of four months, both had lost more than 20 pounds. "Besides looking and feeling 1,000 percent better, it's done amazing things for our relationship," the wife says.



- ✓ **Join a group or a team.** For some people, exercising with a whole group of people — whether an informal group or an organized club or team — is even better than meeting up with a buddy. You have more people to socialize with, and if one person can't make it that day, the workout isn't derailed.

Don't worry if you're the slowest one in the group; just do as much as you can handle. The group will likely push you to try harder and achieve things you never dreamed you could. Don't sweat it, either, if you feel like an outsider for a while; keep showing up, and eventually you'll be one of the gang. To find a group, check with local sporting goods and fitness-equipment stores.



- ✓ **Join an Internet fitness community.** Thanks to the Internet, you can gain inspiration from fitness buddies across the country — or even the world. There are now thousands of Web sites that bring together like-minded fitness buffs so they can discuss their training, share tips, and talk through challenges (see the nearby sidebar for details).

Internet groups are especially helpful for home exercisers, who don't have the social benefit that you can get at a health club and may not have friends or family who exercise.

- ✓ **Read success stories.** The good ones offer not only inspiration but also specific and realistic advice. (Forget about those before-and-after ads in which a blubbery guy with a scowl on his face is miraculously transformed into a grinning hunk of muscle.) On AOL Health, for example, you may read about a woman who beat breast cancer and went on to run a marathon, or a woman who lost 100 pounds and is now a slim, trim fitness instructor. We especially like Internet success stories because you can post and read comments by other readers. Sometimes the posters have some amazing stories to tell.

Training for an event



Suzanne once interviewed an Olympic weight lifter who described himself as a “pretty lazy guy.” “If I wasn’t training for the Olympics,” he said, “I probably wouldn’t even work out.”

Even if you don’t aspire to hoist 424 pounds overhead before thousands of screaming fans, committing to an event can jump-start your workout program. The options are countless — a 5K walk, a 10K run, a mini-triathlon, a 100-mile bike ride. The minute you pay your entry fee, you have a whole new sense of purpose. And the feeling of accomplishment you get from completing your event is like nothing else.

Keeping it interesting

Boredom can be the enemy of any workout. Here are a couple of ways to stay engaged:

✓ **Keep yourself entertained.** Walk on the treadmill while listening to your favorite music on your iPod, and 30 minutes may fly by as if it’s 10 minutes; accidentally leave that iPod at home, and those 30 minutes may seem like 3 hours. For many people, entertainment can mean the difference between sticking with exercise and skipping it. Some gyms now offer on-demand services, MP3 ports in each piece of cardio equipment, and more than 500 entertainment channels.



✓ **Mix up your workouts.** Some people thrive on routine. Suzanne used to ride her bike with a 67-year-old guy named Barry who had been cycling the exact same route on Saturdays for 41 years. Much to the frustration of his wife, Barry refused to take long vacations because he didn’t want to miss his Saturday ride.

Most of us, however, need a bit of variety to stay motivated. For this reason, you may want to try *cross-training*, which simply means mixing up your workouts. You can vary your sport — running on Mondays, yoga on Tuesdays, hiking on Wednesdays, and so on. Or you can vary your pace and terrain — walking fast and flat one day, slow and hilly the next. Or you can try different equipment — using weight machines one session and dumbbells the next. In addition to relieving boredom, varying your workouts helps you avoid injuries from repetitive motions.

Dressing the part

You needn’t become a fitness-clothing junkie, but buying snazzy new workout shorts or comfy new athletic shoes can get you fired up to exercise. Plus, you feel like a workout pro, and you let your fellow exercisers know you’re one of them.



When Liz started indoor rock climbing, she'd show up in running shorts and a T-shirt. She noticed that all the good climbers wore tank tops and long sweat pants cut off at the bottom. Gradually, Liz conformed to the dress code and found out a few things. For one, the "in" crowd was more accepting of her because she looked serious about the sport. But more important, Liz realized that rock climbers dress that way for a reason: The long sweats protect you from bumps and bruises. Cutting off the elastic at the bottom lets you move your legs and feet more freely. And a sleeveless top makes moving your arms easier.

Staying realistic

Trying to do too much or setting your expectations too high can lead to a lot of frustration. Here are some ways to stay on track:



- ✓ **Pace yourself.** Don't buy every exercise DVD, listen to every podcast on the market, or try every weight machine in the gym the first day. You'll flame out fast. Always pace yourself so you live to fight the good fight another day.
- ✓ **Cut yourself some slack.** Recognize that everyone improves at a different pace. Getting inspiration from other people is great, but don't let anyone else's accomplishments diminish your own. Always keep in mind why you laced up your sneakers today and be proud that you've worked up to walking 3 miles every other day, even if your neighbor runs 10 miles a day. Fitness is something personal and unique to you.



And don't get down on yourself if you miss a few days — or even a few weeks — of exercise. If you fall off the wagon, just try again. You have the rest of your life to get this right.

Plugging in to online fitness communities

A Facebook or LinkedIn search for walking groups yields thousands of results. Refine your search for your location, age group, and fitness level, and chances are you'll still have more than 500 groups to choose from.

Liz especially loves the groups on Twitter. Where else can you get great advice and links packaged in a poetic 140 characters or less? Type in your search term, and you'll find others with the same search term in their name or profile. For example, if you type in "weight training," the search may return Twitter handles

like Luv2weighttrain and weightlift4ever. It also gives you anyone who mentions a love of weight training in his or her profile.

If you don't feel like sifting through the results to weed out marketers and potential weirdos, search through a Twitter group-compilation site like www.twibes.com, twittgroups.com, or justtweetit.com. These sites also list instructions for how to communicate with your group through the use of tags and all the other strange little tricks you need to know in order to master any of these social networking sites.