UF|IFAS Extension
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A Guide to Tracking Physical Activity[1]

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Figure 1. Women running up stadium steps for exercise. Image used in the 2014 Research Discoveries report.
Credits: Javier Edwards, UF/IFAS

Being physically active is fun, has many physical and mental health benefits, and can help you maintain a healthy weight. *Physical activity* refers to any body movement caused by the work of skeletal muscles. Skeletal muscles use energy to work or move. *Energy expenditure* refers to the amount of energy that you use or burn in one day. Energy's unit of measure is a kilocalorie, or more commonly referred to as a calorie. The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend that adults be purposefully active for at least 150 minutes per week for overall health and wellness. To lose weight, maintain a significant weight loss, and achieve even greater health benefits your weekly goal should be closer to 300 minutes per week (ODPHP 2016). These guidelines are for moderate-intensity activities like dancing, brisk walking, and swimming. You can achieve similar goals with less time by working in high-intensity activities like running and cycling at a fast pace. One proven strategy to make sure you reach your activity goal is to track your energy expenditure. There are numerous free or low cost cell phone apps, websites, and portable devices available to help with this. Below is a brief guide for how to use a variety of these methods.

Cell Phone Apps

MyFitnessPal®

To track your physical activity through the MyFitnessPal app, click on the "Diary" option at the bottom of the screen. Scroll down to the exercise box and select "Add Exercise." Next, select exercise type "cardio." It is then easiest to select the "All Exercises" option at the far right and input the length of time you were active. MyFitnessPal keeps track of the number of minutes of cardio and provides a rough estimate of the number of calories burned during the activity. To include strength training activities in your energy expenditure, select "cardio" for exercise type and then select "strength" under this heading. You also have options to track your steps and/or add a partner device that tracks your physical activity (such as a watch-type device). MyFitnessPal also has the option for you to track your food intake, so that you can monitor and maintain a healthy balance between energy intake and energy expenditure.

Health (iPhone Only)

This app comes downloaded on the iPhone and automatically tracks your steps, walking and running distance, and flights of stairs climbed. The walking and running distance information can then be entered into another app or website, such as the MyFitnessPal app or the SuperTracker website, to calculate your energy expenditure. The Health app reports daily totals for number of steps (steps taken), number of miles (walking and running distance), and number of floors (flights of stairs climbed), as well as daily averages. It also reports data for the day, week, month, and year. This information is great for tracking your progress.

Charity Miles®

This app may be used to track your physical activity when you are walking, running, or biking. For use, first select "Enable Motion Detection" and set the location tracker for the app to "Always." These settings will allow the app to track your physical activity through your phone. Next, select a charity. For every 5 miles of distance covered, Charity Miles® will donate $1 to this charity. Finally, select an activity: outdoor walk/run, indoor walk/run, or outdoor bike. The app will track your distance and the amount of time it took you to cover that distance. As with the Health app, this information can be put into another app or website to calculate your energy expenditure.

Websites
SuperTracker®

https://www.supertracker.usda.gov/

To use this website, go to the "Physical Activity Tracker" box on the home page and type in your activity (a drop-down menu of activity options is provided). Once you begin typing in your activity, specific suggestions will pop up; select the option that is closest to the activity you performed. The level of intensity for the selected exercise, as well as whether or not muscle strengthening was incorporated in the activity, will be displayed. Type in the number of minutes you were active and select the day the activity was completed. Selecting the day the activity was completed allows you to keep a record of your activity over a span of time. An option will also be provided for you to enter your weight. This is so that the number of calories burned can be calculated.

Take Action!®

http://takeactionca.cdph.ca.gov/participant-weekly-tracking.asp

This website features weekly tracking sheets that may be used to track your physical activity each day for a week. Recording your physical activity will make you more aware of how much activity you are completing. At the top of each weekly tracking sheet, you are encouraged to write a daily goal. A great starting goal would be 30 minutes of physical activity per day, but will vary depending on your current activity level. By saving your weekly tracking sheets, you can keep track of your progress and hopefully see an increase in your physical activity participation over time.

A Healthier You®

http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/healthieryou/html/phys_activity_tracker.html

This website is similar to the Take Action! Website, as it encourages you to track your physical activity each day on a weekly tracking sheet. However, this particular sheet provides space for you to write a unique goal for each day of the week. It also differentiates between cardio/aerobic and strength training exercise. This can help ensure that you are participating in both types of exercise, which is important for maintaining optimal health. In the "Notes to myself" section under each weekday heading, try writing a little motivational message (along with your goal for that day). This may help keep you motivated to stay physically active!

Devices
Pedometer

A pedometer is a small portable device used to track your steps. It is usually worn on the waistband and should be positioned directly above your knee. Start by wearing a pedometer for a few days to determine how active you are now. Then set a goal to increase your steps by about 500 per day. Increase by another 500 each week until your reach at least 10,000 steps per day. Try starting a log in which you record the number of steps you take each day. This will allow you to track your progress over time. A pedometer is relatively inexpensive, and can be easily worn at nearly all times.

FitBit®

https://www.fitbit.com/

This portable device looks much like a watch and is worn on your wrist. It is a more expensive option, but provides a great deal of information related to physical activity. The "All-Day Activity" feature tracks your steps, distance covered, number of calories burned, and number of minutes you spent being active. SmartTrack automatically senses your participation in certain physical activities and records this participation in the exercise section of the associated app. The FitBit syncs your physical activity tracking information directly to most smartphones and computers, thus enabling you to keep a log of your physical activity over time without having to keep a written record.

Misfit Flash™

http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2488976,00.asp

This portable device may be clipped onto your clothing just like the pedometer. It is linked to an app, the "Link app," which allows you to set daily activity goals. How far the lights flash around the perimeter of the device shows you how close you are to meeting your physical activity goal. The device is waterproof, so it is great for tracking activity while swimming. If you do not have your phone handy during use for direct syncing to the "Link app," the device will store your activity information and will upload to the app the next time it is synced.

Conclusion

No matter which device or website you choose to track your physical activity, there are a few other things to keep in mind to help support your active lifestyle.

• Recruit a partner for support.

• Start slowly and build up.

• Break your activity into 10 minute intervals if needed.

Also, it is important to remember that energy expenditure information (calories) calculated from some devices/sites are just estimates, and some may be more accurate than others. That means if you try a few different programs, you will likely get slightly different numbers. Don't fret! The exact numbers are less important than your ability to identify your activity patterns, find times in the day to be more active, and monitor if you have consistently increased your activity. To do this, your best bet is to pick the program that works best for you and stick to that one app or website. Be

careful not to "double count" your activity. This can happen if you are uploading information from a FitBit® or similar device that you wore while walking on your treadmill and then also adding activity data from your treadmill. Use your body weight to concurrently monitor your balance between energy expenditure and energy intake. Weigh yourself about once a week before you eat or get dressed and track your progress.

Reference

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP). 2016. "Physical Activity Guidelines, Chapter 4." https://health.gov/paguidelines/guidelines/chapter4.aspx