MENU





Health Conditions A-Z

Wellness & Self-Care

News

Product Reviews

Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

WORKOUTS & ACTIVITIES

Stair Climbing Workouts: Health Benefits, How to Get Started, and How to Get Better

By Jessica Migala

Published on February 28, 2023

Medically Reviewed by Nicole A. Solomos, DO

ON THIS PAGE

Definition | Health Benefits | For Weight Loss | How to Get Started | How to Get Better | Nutrition Tips | Summary

If briskly climbing a flight of stairs (or a few) leaves you winded, it's no surprise.

Stair climbing is a legitimate exercise — and an internationally recognized sport — that can improve your fitness.

Luckily, you don't need to climb to the top of a skyscraper to get a good sweat on; stair workouts can be accessible at the gym, a park, or in your home.

What Is Stair Climbing?

Privacy - Terms

Health Conditions A-Z

Wellness & Self-Care

News

Product Reviews

Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources

About Us

running, for example, is an organized, competitive sport where athletes run up the stairways of tall buildings, such as skyscrapers, according to a review of the sport published in the March 2020 *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

These stairs can be located in a stairwell of a building, outside at a park or local stadium, or in a gym on a stair climbing machine, which simulates climbing stairs. This activity can also be done on a set of stairs at your house.

Stair climbing exercise can be a strenuous, says Alexandra Lempke, PhD, a clinical assistant professor of applied exercise science and the codirector of the Michigan Performance Research Laboratory at the University of Michigan School of Kinesiology in Ann Arbor. When you climb stairs, your heart rate and breathing will increase.

"Stair climbing for exercise targets the cardiovascular and respiratory systems," Dr. Lempke says. It takes a lot of work to move your body mass vertically against gravity.

The physiological systems targeted during stair climbing also depend on how you're doing it. For instance, says Lempke, if you're walking or slowly jogging the stairs, this lower-intensity movement will be more of an aerobic endurance exercise.

Stair sprinting, on the other hand, is an anaerobic exercise that targets muscular power, she says. Anaerobic exercise is when muscles use glucose for energy rather than oxygen (which occurs in aerobic exercise), per the International Sports Sciences Association; a HIIT workout is an example of anaerobic exercise.

Health Conditions A-Z

Wellness & Self-Care

News

Product Reviews

Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources

About Us

Potential Health Benefits of Stair Climbing Workouts

Stair climbing can deliver a lot of benefits for health and well-being, whether you're doing it as part of a formal workout or not. Here are some of those potential benefits.

Improved Metabolic Health

Metabolic syndrome is a cluster of conditions — including high blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol levels — that increases your risk for heart disease, stroke, and diabetes, per Mayo Clinic. It's important for your overall health to reduce your risk.

Some data suggest that using stairs in your everyday life, such as by walking up a flight or two instead of taking the elevator, is a burst of intense exercise that may stave off metabolic disease.

In a study of 782 women whose average age was 58, researchers asked: Do you climb stairs daily? Those who didn't were 72 percent more likely to have metabolic syndrome than self-reported daily stair climbers. (The researchers point out there are limitations, given that the stair climbing data was self-reported and other factors could be at play.)

Other research that looked at older men found that over a 12-year follow-up period, those who climbed at least 35 floors per week were 16 percent less likely to die from any cause than those who climbed fewer than 10 floors weekly.



Health Conditions A-Z

Wellness & Self-Care

News

Product Reviews

Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

You can feel your heart working harder and the fire in your lungs when you ascend stairs. And that's provoking important changes in your cardiorespiratory system that will make physical activities, like running and walking, feel easier.

In a small study of 31 young sedentary women, those who participated in a stair interval workout of three sets of 20 sprints ascending stairs three times a week for six weeks improved their Vo2 max (an indication of cardiorespiratory fitness) by 12 percent. Researchers concluded that stair climbing was a time-efficient way to improve fitness, including for beginners.

Boosted Energy and Mood

"Stair climbing gives a nice endorphin high," says Glassey. That boost in feelings of vigor can keep people coming back to the workout. In a study of young adults, men who performed three one-minute stair climbing intervals felt more energetic and less tense and tired than they did in a control session (no stair climbing). The study was also done in women, but they did not experience this benefit. The more intense the stair climb intervals were, the more the men's mood improved. These heart-pounding workouts may increase blood flow to the brain or activate certain brain regions related to cognitive performance, the researchers noted in their paper.

And while that research didn't find positive effects for women, other studies have.

One study in college-age sleep-deprived women found that 10 minutes of low to moderate intensity stair walking was more energizing than 50 milligrams of caffeine. (That's about the same amount as in a half cup of coffee, according to the USDA.)

Health Conditions A-Z Wellness & Self-Care News Product Reviews Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

burn rate calculator on UC San Diego Health.

That said, because stair climbing can be a more intense exercise — and easing into it slowly is important — you may not be able to do it for a full 30 minutes, hour, or however long you're able to sustain doing another type of activity (like running or walking). That's okay. Stair climbing can be part of a larger exercise routine; and it's okay to take breaks.

Also note that interval training — alternating bouts of higher-intensity effort with bouts of less-intense activity (running upstairs and then heading back down at an easier pace is an example) — can promote fat loss, while helping preserve lean muscle, per Mayo Clinic. This type of workout comes with other cardiovascular benefits, including strengthening the efficiency of your heart and lungs.

Weight loss typically requires both exercise and better eating habits. For safe weight loss, aim to consume 500 fewer calories than you burn per day, recommends the National Institutes of Health. To know exactly what that looks like for you, they recommend plugging your information into their Body Weight Planner.

Gear: What Equipment You'll Need for Stair Climbing Workouts

Stair climbing workouts can be done at no cost on preexisting stairs at home, outdoors, or in public places, or inside on equipment. Here's what you'll need.

A set of stairs Stairs can be found in your home, in an apartment or office building, or outside in a park or stadium (such as at a high school football field).

Health Conditions A-Z

Wellness & Self-Care

News

Product Reviews

Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

purchase a stair machine, though they are expensive — running into the thousands of dollars. Know what style you prefer before you buy, and consider looking for used one for sale in your area, such as through Facebook Marketplace. If you're buying one for your home, consider the height of the machine — and the ceiling height required to safely use it.

Running or walking shoes There aren't stair-specific shoes, so wear a comfortable workout shoe, says Glassey. If you are racing or getting into stair climbs more competitively, you'll want a lightweight pair of shoes, he says.

Comfortable workout clothing Dress as if you were going for a run or to the gym. Comfortable, moisture-wicking clothing will help keep you cool as you move. Remember, you'll build up body heat quickly.

How to Get Started With Stair Climbing Workouts: 7 Tips

Because stairs are so accessible both outdoors in the community or as standard pieces of equipment at a gym, it's easy to get started. Once you've located your steps, here's what you need to know.

1. Warm Up

Before a cardio workout, warm up with an activity that increases your heart rate. Walk or pedal on an exercise bike first for about 5 to 10 minutes, recommends Bridget Behrmann, the vice president of operations at the YMCA of Greater Cincinnati and an ACE-certified personal trainer.

Health Conditions A-Z Wellness & Self-Care News Product Reviews Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

one additional minute next time. If you're at a 7 or 8? Next workout, you might want to stick with five minutes again. Gradually work your way up.

3. Control Your Tempo

It's tempting to want to move up the first flight of stairs as fast as you can. But that's a good way to peter out quickly. Berhmann suggests a stair climbing workout for beginners that breaks into a 1–2–3 workout.

- 1 Start by walking up the stairs and walking down.
- 2 On the second set, add your arms and increase your speed a little bit; descend the stairs with a walk or light jog. (This helps you recover before each stair climb.)
- 3 On the third set of stairs, "go the hardest you can go safely," says Behrmann. Again, on the descent, walk or lightly jog down.

For the remainder of the workout, you can repeat this pattern or create a pattern of your choice. (Alternate between 2 and 3, for example.)

If you're on a machine, you can gradually increase your tempo in a similar way. What's important is that you begin at a doable pace for you so that you can complete your planned workout. Also understand how to operate the machine in case you need to stop it quickly.

4. Mind the Rails

It's easy to cheat when using some stair machines because you can hold onto the rails and use them to take weight off your lower body. The problem is, says Glassey,

Health Conditions A-Z

Wellness & Self-Care

News

Product Reviews

Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources

About Us

that's okay, but make sure you're relying on them for stability — not to take a load off your body, he says.

5. Go Easy on Your Joints

One of the downsides to a stair workout is that going down the stairs can be high-impact on your lower body, says Glassey. (Going up stairs, on the other hand, does not cause this pounding.) Beginners are more likely to get extremely sore on stair workouts because of the downward component, which can be demotivating.

"Over time, this soreness will go away as your muscles become adapted, but the impact is still there," he says. Glassey recommends climbing upstairs in a building and then taking an elevator down. If that's not an option or you're climbing stairs outside, you can go downstairs with less impact by changing your foot position. Descend slowly with toes turned in (pigeon toed) or out (duck feet). Additional resistance training that focuses on the lower body can help increase strength and take pressure off the joints.

With a stair machine this isn't an issue, since you're continuously climbing up.

6. Cool Down

You can cool down just as you began: Take an easy walk or ride on the exercise bike for five minutes, says Behrmann.

7. Incorporate Stair Workouts Gradually

When it comes to creating a beginner stair climber workout plan, ease into it. Avoid jumping into a plan that has you climbing stairs five days a week right off the bat.

Health Conditions A-Z Wellness & Self-Care News Product Reviews Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

That means: Slowly change these variables as you feel stronger and in need of more of a challenge — not all at once. Do a longer stair workout, lightly jog instead of walk, or do stairs twice a week instead of once.

How to Make a Stair Climbing Workout Harder

Stair climbing workouts are tough on their own. If you're already in a good stair climbing routine, here are some ways to kick it up a bit.

Double stepping — or skipping a step — increases your range of motion. "Maintaining your range of motion is important for healthy aging," says Glassey. Skipping steps is also faster, he says. Skipping can be done on regular stairs or a StairMill. If you're using a StairMill, double stepping may take some practice to get the hang of.

Increase your pace to up the intensity. As long as you feel ready, you can challenge yourself by moving up the stairs faster, by moving from a walk to a light jog or a steady run to a sprint. Use the "talk test" to gauge intensity. During moderate intensity exercise you should be able to talk, but not sing; during vigorous intensity exercise you will not be able to say more than a few words without pausing to take a breath, according to the CDC. Remember to build in recovery time. For instance, maybe you run up five flights of stairs and then walk down or take the elevator back down.

Sign up for a tower race. If you're hooked, consider signing up for a tower race, which is held in the stairwells of tall buildings across the world. Tower Running World Association lists races by month. Just be sure you know how to train for a

Health Conditions A-Z Wellness & Self-Care News Product Reviews Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

NUTRITION TIPS FOR STAIR CHIMBING WORKOUTS

Whether you're walking, running, or sprinting up those stairs, here's what you need to know about what to eat before, during, and after a workout.

Before

Make sure you're eating something one to four hours before your workout, says the ACSM-certified personal trainer and registered dietitian-nutritionist Katie Hake, RDN, who's based in Indianapolis. That space between eating and exercise is crucial: "Eating immediately before a workout may result in gastrointestinal distress as your stomach tries to digest," she says. Experiment to figure out when your sweet spot is for fueling up.

Carbohydrates are the fuel for muscles, she says. A piece of fruit with some nut butter, a piece of whole-grain toast with nut butter, or some nuts and fruit can be a nice pre-workout snack. You may not need a snack at all if you've eaten a meal within one to four hours before your planned workout. Or you may not need or want to eat anything beforehand if you're working out shortly after you wake up in the morning; research suggests that there are some benefits to working out in a fasting state.

During

You shouldn't need to eat mid-workout unless your training is longer than 60 to 90 minutes, says Hake, which is unlikely with a stair workout. Still, make sure you're drinking water throughout to replace the fluid lost through sweat.

Health Conditions A-Z Wellness &

Wellness & Self-Care

News Product Reviews

Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

planned meal or a carb and protein post-workout snack, such as a turkey sandwich, trail mix, egg sandwich on an English muffin, chocolate milk, or Greek yogurt and berries, says Hake.

The Takeaway

Stair climbing is a type of vertical training that can improve cardiovascular and respiratory systems, metabolic health, and energy. This calorie-burning exercise can be performed using a stair machine or preexisting stairs. You can start slowly and gradually work your way up, but consult your healthcare provider about any new workout regimen before doing so.

Common Questions & Answers Is running up stairs a good workout? Yes, there are numerous health benefits to stair climbing, including strengthening your heart and lungs and burning calories. Is stair climbing cardio? How many stairs should I climb for a good workout? Is climbing stairs good for losing weight? Is climbing stairs as good as walking?

Health Conditions A-Z

Wellness & Self-Care

News

Product Reviews

Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

CIEVEIAITU CIITIIC. ACTUDIC EXCICISE

Harvard Health Publishing: Climbing Stairs Linked to Lower Risk of Heart Disease

Duke University: Benefits of Taking the Stairs

Journal of Taibah University Medical Sciences: Stair-Climbing Interventions on

Cardio-Metabolic Outcomes in Adults: A Scoping Review

EDITORIAL SOURCES

Everyday Health follows strict sourcing guidelines to ensure the accuracy of its content, outlined in our editorial policy. We use only trustworthy sources, including peer-reviewed studies, board-certified medical experts, patients with lived experience, and information from top institutions.

Sources +

Sign up for our Healthy Living Newsletter!

Enter your email

Subscribe

By subscribing you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy.

RELATED ARTICLES

See all in Workouts & Activities >

WORKOUTS & ACTIVITIES

How to Get Started With Resistance Band Workouts: An Absolute Beginner's Guide

Health Conditions A-Z

Wellness & Self-Care

News

Product Reviews

Find a Doctor

Tools & Resources About Us

Get Started

Medically Reviewed by Reyna Franco, RDN | October 25, 2024

WORKOUTS & ACTIVITIES

Muscle Atrophy: 5 Exercises to Build Strength

Medically Reviewed by Scott Haak, PT, DPT, MTC, CSCS | October 23, 2024

WORKOUTS & ACTIVITIES

Planks: What Muscles They Work and How to Do One

Medically Reviewed by Scott Haak, PT, DPT, MTC, CSCS | October 22, 2024

WORKOUTS & ACTIVITIES

Should You Work Out When Sick? Your Guide to Exercising While Ill

Medically Reviewed by Scott Haak, PT, DPT, MTC, CSCS | October 18, 2024

WORKOUTS & ACTIVITIES

15 Ways to Burn 150 Calories

嫯 Medically Reviewed by Kara Andrew, RDN, LDN | August 30, 2024

WORKOUTS & ACTIVITIES

A 30-minute, Do-Anywhere HIIT Workout

Medically Reviewed by Kara Andrew, RDN, LDN | July 3, 2024

Health Conditions A-Z Wellness & Self-Care **Product Reviews** Find a Doctor News

Tools & Resources About Us

WORKOUTS & ACTIVITIES

An Equipment-Free Pilates Workout for Toned Arms



Medically Reviewed by Reyna Franco, RDN | May 22, 2024

WORKOUTS & ACTIVITIES

A 7-Minute Core Workout for Absolute **Beginners**

Medically Reviewed by Reyna Franco, RDN | May 8, 2024



Wellness inspired. Wellness enabled.













A PROPERTY OF

About Us Privacy Policy

Editorial Policy Terms of Use

Meet Our Health Expert

Network

Consumer Health Data

Privacy Policy

Careers Accessibility

Statement

Do Not Sell My Personal

Information

Contact Us

NEWSLETTERS

Get the best in health and wellness

Enter your email

Subscribe

By subscribing you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy.

Health Conditions A-Z V Wellness & Self-Care V News V Product Reviews V Find a Doctor V

Tools & Resources ∨ About Us ∨

© 1996-2025 Everyday Health, Inc., a Ziff Davis company. All rights reserved. Everyday Health is among the federally registered trademarks of Everyday Health, Inc. and may not be used by third parties without explicit permission.

All information on the Everyday Health website is for informational purposes only, and is not intended to be used for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. For more details, see Everyday Health's Terms of Use.