



Get Physical

The President of the United States, it is reported, regularly runs a 7½ minute mile. While I could probably keep pace, I've been wondering how the rest of the nation would fare in that footrace. What sort of shape are Americans in today? Have we gone soft, or are we still exercising like we did when Jane Fonda workout videos and mauve leg warmers were all the rage?

Apparently, most of us are still putting in the time. Seventy-seven percent of adults in a just-released Princeton Survey Research Associates poll report getting regular exercise. This finding has remained relatively consistent since 1983, according to a long-running survey series by *Prevention* magazine. Over this period, nearly eight in ten routinely professed engaging in regular exercise.

Of course, not all exercise is created equal. Likely, we define exercise in many different ways—biking, running, the walk from the couch to the refrigerator. One person may consider the 75 paces to and from the company mailroom to be adequate daily exercise, while others haven't worked out until they've posted a three-mile run. Further, definitions for how often we put in the exercise may vary considerably, from the diehard who aerobicizes every day to the person recalling having had to shovel snow off the front steps a dozen times over the course of the past winter.

To glean a more precise understanding of both how hard and how frequently we exercise, *Prevention* asked how often the public works out strenuously, to the point of heavy breathing and an accelerated heart rate lasting for at least 20 minutes. Using this measure of physical exertion, there has been a modest increase in self-reported exercise since the early '80s. In 1983, a third reported this sort of vigorous exercise three or more times a week, 46% said they did it at least twice a week, and 59% said at least once a week. In 2001, PSRA found 44% reporting strenuous workouts three or more times a week, 56% at least twice a week, and 65% saying at least once a week. Those who never engage in this sort of exercise have remained steady, making up approximately one-fifth of the population over this period.

Sounds like we're exercising at least as much and as hard as we ever have. Curiously, most Americans aren't buying it. Eighty-three percent in the PSRA poll think that the nation

doesn't get much exercise. Adding weight to that notion—and perhaps casting doubt on the PSRA/*Prevention* findings—one in five in a 1998 ABC News poll admits occasionally telling little white lies about how much exercise they do.

When asked to offer explanations for what most often keeps them from working out, 52% of adults claim a lack of time, 49% are too tired, 47% routinely find something more important to do, and 28% say exercise is just plain boring, according to a 2000 National Men's Health Foundation poll.

Certainly, I can relate to those telling tales and offering up excuses—at one time or another I've used them all. But the day you wake up and can no longer button your trousers, you may find you have the incentive necessary to locate that extra 20 minutes in your schedule.

While self-reported exercise patterns haven't changed much, one interesting development is the shift in age of those who show up at the gym, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association. Today, instead of "sweatin' to the oldies," genXers are sweatin' *with* the oldies. Greater numbers of baby boomers and seniors over age 55 are heading to the gym than in the past. Compared to 1987, those under 35 now make up a smaller proportion of health club members than those over 35. And as a result, the SGMA reports, the primary reason for working out also appears to be changing. Growing numbers of exercisers are more intent on developing healthier lifestyles and remaining fit than sporting six-pack abs. Apparently, these folks are working out for increased vitality, not necessarily to buff up for beach weather.

Another change of note is the sort of activities we're doing to stay healthy. The heyday of cross-country ski machines, rowing machines, and Jane Fonda videos is over. If you want to be cutting-edge today, you're doing time on the treadmill, pumping iron, or walking for fitness. Other activities on the rise include yoga classes, motion trainers, and reclining bikes, according to the SGMA.

Fit Americans may be looking older and grayer, but the public is exercising as much as it ever has—at least we *say* we're exercising as much as we ever have. As to that jog on the White House track—if asked, many Americans would likely say they could keep pace with Mr. Bush. Whether they'd have the time, or think it's important enough to do, well, that's another story. ●

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