



fmpulse

HEALTH & FITNESS

Activity Should Start From Infancy

Although you already encourage physical activity for people of all ages, new guidelines now recommend that activity be encouraged from the earliest stages of life. The new guidelines, set forth by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, encourage parents and caregivers to foster physical activity in children beginning in infancy in an effort to combat the growing obesity epidemic in the U.S.

Experts now suggest that parents stimulate their children's physical skill development just as they commonly encourage cognitive skills such as learning new words. The guidelines call on parents to foster movement and motor skill development in their children early on as a way to avoid the pattern of sedentary living and weight gain plaguing millions of Americans.

"We know that adults who are inactive were also inactive in their youth," says Dr. Judith C. Young, executive director of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. The nonprofit group based its recommendations on almost 40 research studies.

Included in the recommendations are that parents should minimize the time preschoolers spend sitting in front of the TV and computers, and instead make sure that three-, four- and five-year-olds accumulate at least one hour of structured physical activity per day. Kids can benefit from almost any activity that encourages them to walk, run, balance, throw, roll or kick. "They're not going to be doing push-ups and sit-ups," Young says. Toddlers between the ages of one and three should get at least 30 minutes of activity each day, and neither age group should be sedentary for more than one hour at a time, unless they are asleep.

Experts suggested mixing physically stimulating activities into the day-to-day routine of a child's life. When walking with a child, "walk the curb. It's a balancing activity," suggests Dr. Jane Clark, a professor of

kinesiology at the University of Maryland, and chair of the task force that authored the recommendations.

Experts stress that even infants can be spurred to use their motor skills. Parents can make a habit of letting infants

loungue on a blanket that allows rolling and crawling rather than confining them to a seat. "Although it may appear that sitting up, rolling over and crawling emerge naturally, these behaviors are clearly influenced by the parent and/or caregiver, and the environmental stimulation available to the infant," the report indicates. **FM**



GOVERNMENT

Weight-Loss Programs May Be Tax-Deductible

If your members are losing weight under a doctor's orders, they may now qualify for a tax deduction. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) issued a ruling in April explaining conditions under which expenses for certain weight-loss programs may qualify as a medical deduction.

Revenue Ruling 2002-19 gives examples of two taxpayers participating in weight-loss programs. These taxpayers paid fees to join the programs and to attend periodic meetings, and purchased diet plans and booklets. One was diagnosed by a doctor as obese, and the other as suffering from hypertension. Both participated in the programs as treatment for their diseases. The costs related to their weight-loss programs are deductible for these taxpayers, to the extent not reimbursed by insurance or otherwise. The ruling distinguishes these cases from situations in which taxpayers participate in weight-loss programs to improve their general health or appearance. Such costs are nondeductible personal expenses.

Although diet foods may also be part of a weight-loss program, these are substitutes for the food that taxpayers normally consume. As such, they are not deductible medical expenses, even for taxpayers whose disease qualifies them to deduct weight-loss-program costs.

Revenue Ruling 2002-19 is available on the IRS website at www.irs.gov. It is also published in the Internal Revenue Bulletin 2002-16 (Apr. 22, 2002). **FM**



HEALTH & FITNESS

FITNESS LEVEL FOUND VITAL IN DEATH RISK

There is more good news for all who exercise regularly: A new study has found that the fittest people may survive the longest, which suggests that physical fitness is more important in death risk than high blood pressure, high cholesterol or smoking.

The study, published in The New England Journal of Medicine (Mar. 14, 2002), involved more than 6,200 U.S. men who underwent treadmill testing for cardiovascular disease. Researchers found that the risk of death over six years declined as exercise capacity rose. This was true of both men with cardiovascular disease and those whose exercise tests were normal. In fact, exercise capacity was the best predictor of death risk among men with cardiovascular disease. And among all participants, those in the group with the lowest exercise capacity were about four times more likely to die during the study period compared with the fittest group.

*Overall, fitness mattered more in death risk than such cardiovascular risk factors as high blood pressure, smoking and body mass index. Findings like this, the researchers write, "confirm the protective role" of exercise, even in individuals who have other health risk factors. **FM***

