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[<< Back](#)

Exercise: The Proper Prescription?

Q. I know we're all supposed to keep fit, but I'm wondering why so many doctors are suggesting exercise to patients with chronic health problems like diabetes or arthritis. Isn't it better to take it easy if you're dealing with a serious illness?
-- Michelle

A. (Published 7/11/00) Human beings weren't designed to be couch potatoes -- and I, for one, am glad that more and more physicians are recommending their patients [exercise](#) to improve health. The fact is, exercise can help treat (as well as prevent) a long list of disorders, from the common cold to heart disease, osteoporosis, diabetes, and asthma. I was delighted to come across an excellent new book on the subject, "[Healing Moves: How to Cure, Relieve, and Prevent Common Ailments with Exercise](#)," (Crown Publishing Group, April 2000) by Carol Krucoff and Mitchell Krucoff, M.D., a husband and wife writing team. Carol writes a health column for the Washington Post, and Mitchell is a cardiologist at Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina.

The Krucoffs have done a terrific job explaining how to combat common ailments with exercise. In their easy, conversational style, they've cited a long list of scientific studies that show how exercise can improve the outlook for various chronic conditions. They write, "Physical activity can help some diabetics come off insulin and some hypertensives quit their high-blood-pressure medication. It can lower cholesterol, ease arthritis pain, lift depression, relieve anxiety, and help asthmatics breathe more easily. It can slow the aging process and boost both the length and the quality of life." They also point out that prescribing exercise for health dates back to the time of Hippocrates in 400 B.C.

In eight separate chapters, the Krucoffs present specific exercise "prescriptions" for people with different types of chronic health problems. Each chapter provides background information on a particular disorder, with explanations on how exercise can help and instructions on how to gradually work up to an ideal amount of curative or preventive exercise.

I was glad to see that in addition to such Western moves as aerobics (principally [walking](#)), strength training, and flexibility work, the Krucoffs recommend mind-body practices such as Qi Gong, [relaxation breathing](#), and yoga postures to help deal with stress. (This shouldn't be too surprising given that Carol has a black belt in karate, is a yoga devotee, and a certified personal trainer.) I also liked the fact that the Krucoffs stress how much fun physical activity can be. If you're having any trouble getting started on an exercise program, I highly recommend "Healing Moves" -- not just for its medically sound advice, but for its upbeat and inspirational style.

Tomorrow: Need a Natural Lip Balm?

Dr. Andrew Weil

[<< Back](#)