What is Cardiovascular Health?

We all remember our days in gym class of running laps and climbing ropes. We treasured playing dodge ball and running under a giant parachute. Aside from delighting our childlike desire to play, these activities were designed to accomplish an important purpose. Gym class and sports practices were developed to get our hearts pumping and to improve our cardiovascular endurance.

What is cardiovascular endurance?

Cardiovascular training involves exercises that recruit both our cardiovascular and respiratory systems. When you think of activities that cause your heart to beat faster or you to breathe rapidly, these are activities that improve your cardiovascular endurance. Cardiovascular training is often referred to simply as "cardio" or "aerobic" training and includes exercises such as cycling, running, walking, and swimming.

Why is cardiovascular endurance important?

Cardiovascular training engages both your cardiovascular and respiratory systems, or more simply, your heart and your lungs. Stressing these systems and organs through exercising teaches them to become stronger and more efficient. For example, the stroke volume (amount of blood that is ejected in one heart beat) of a trained athlete will be much higher than the stroke volume for an untrained individual. As a result, a trained athlete's heart at rest will be required to beat fewer times per minute than an untrained individual's. Improving the efficiency of these systems allows the body to maintain health with less strain and difficulty.

How do we measure cardiovascular endurance?

While many activities are outstanding methods to improve cardiovascular health, measuring the intensity of these activities is an important way to assess both effectiveness and improvement. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends that individuals train between 64 - 94% of their maximal heart rate to improve health and endurance. The following equation is used to determine individual maximal heart rate:

Maximal HR = 220 - age

Using the maximal heart rate an individual can determine his or heart ideal training rage by multiplying maximal heart rate and target percentage.

Target HR (lower) = [maximal HR] x 0.64

Target HR (upper) = [maximal HR] x 0.94

For example, a 35 year old individual with an estimated heart rate or 185 (220 - 35 = 185) would want to exercise with the range of 118 - 174 beats per minute.

How do we measure our heart rate?

There are several methods for measuring your heart rate. We are all accustomed to the stethoscopes that health professionals utilize to clearly hear our heart beat, but it is unlikely that you will be carrying a stethoscope with you the next time you go out for a walk. Finding your pulse on your neck or on your wrist is an effective way to count your heart beats. After you find your pulse you can watch a clock for 15 seconds as you count the number of times that your heart beats. When you determine the number of beats in 15 seconds you can multiply this number by 4 to establish your heart rate, or beats per minute. You can also purchase a heart rate monitor to wear while exercising to ensure that you are training within the target range.

Improving your cardiovascular health and endurance is a key aspect in developing your overall wellness. A healthy heart will undoubtedly lengthen your life and the types of activity that you are able to enjoy as you grow older. As you fondly recall your days of recess and gym class, remember the activities that you once enjoyed with great enthusiasm, and try those activities again. You will get your heart pumping and improve your health!

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