Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Why Exercise?

It is well know that *a* sedentary lifestyle substantially increases your risk of certain serious illnesses, saps energy and makes it all but certain that you'll gain weight over time. Let’s first look at the risks of being a “couch potato”.

Illnesses associated with inactivity include:

Heart Disease - Inactivity is associated with elevated levels of fat (triglycerides) and cholesterol in your blood and with high blood pressure and obesity. Blood chemistry and pressure problems, in turn, increase the risks for heart disease, diabetes, stroke and some forms of cancer.

Bone and Joint Disease - Sedentary individuals are more prone to developing bone and joint problems like osteoporosis and arthritis. Inactivity leads to a loss of bodily flexibility and muscle tone, and weakened muscles lead to increased risk of everyday injuries and accidents due to their inability to properly protect and cushion joints. Conditions like arthritis become even more debilitating when inactivity leads to increased stiffness and pain.

Obesity - In an inactive person the tendency of the body to lose lean body mass (muscle) and gain body fat as the years advance is more pronounced than in a physically active individual. Weight gain is almost certain unless caloric intake is significantly reduced, which is unlikely in the current cultural environment of large portions and high fat, high calorie snacks.

Cognitive Problems - A sedentary lifestyle reduces a person’s problem solving ability, speed of thinking, short and long-term memory, reaction time, and also increases a person's risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease.

In addition to increasing risk for serious illness, inactivity also reduces an individual’s energy, and contributes to a loss of muscle mass, which leads directly to a decrease in metabolism and accompanying propensity to gain weight. Flexibility and muscle strength are reduced and activities of daily life become more difficult. Inactivity results in a person tiring more easily than if that person was physically active. Over time, the body becomes less efficient at burning calories, while eating habits stay about the same. The extra calories ingested are not immediately usable, and instead are stored in the form of fat reserves. Even an extra hundred calories a day in excess of what the body needs to perform vital functions will result in the gaining of ten pounds in a year. Without exercise to help burn off excess calories weight gain becomes all but inevitable.

An inactive person misses out on a major tool for reducing stress and preventing or repairing mild forms of depression. The brain of a sedentary individual works less efficiently than it would if the same individual were more active. Everyday stresses become more overwhelming as the body is subjected to frequent bursts of hormones associated with the 'fight or flight' stress response without the advantage of the regular exercise (a flight response of sorts) to help channel the stress reaction, soothe muscle tension, and reduce feelings of mild depression.

Without regular exercise sleep may be disrupted, eating for emotional reasons may increase, and the use of substances such as drugs or alcohol may also intensify.

The physical changes resulting from inactivity are demoralizing, frustrating and limiting not only to the sedentary individual but also for their family. An inactive individual is more likely to gain weight,

which often leads to feeling less attractive and less self-confident. It can become a chore to make it through daily responsibilities and the promise of a couch and comforting snacks or beverages when work is done may become the highlight of the day. People often interpret these changes as signs they are aging even when they are chronologically middle-aged or younger. In fact, many of the liabilities often associated with aging are actually the result of not giving the body opportunities for the activity it needs.

Exercise is simply essential to sustained weight management. While genetics do predispose some individuals towards gain weight and affect the speed with which weight may be lost, people's lifestyle choices (exercise, diet, etc.) play the major role in their ability to maintain a reasonable weight. Even though only a very few people ever get to have the slender, toned bodies idealized by the popular media, everyone can choose to become more active and fit and maximize their potential.