This issue of Healthy Camels, written by Dr. Rich DeBenedetto is dedicated to separating fact from fiction and proven benefit from Madison Avenue advertising hype, when considering various forms of exercise. Dr. DeBenedetto is a Campbell University community pharmacy resident with Walgreens in Raleigh.

Historically, we have been a people who were not sedentary but rarely had periods of abundant food. Our migration from hunters and gatherers to farmers and cultivators and then again to people who rely on mass food production facilities, has greatly affected our health and the size clothes we wear. Until recently, we didn’t get many chances to eat large amounts of carbohydrates, sugar, and fats as these were somewhat scarce and costly. In fact, at one time it was considered attractive to be ‘plump’ as it was a sign that you were financially well off. With the rise of large scale farming, and supermarket shopping, exercise is no longer required to eat; now our bodies are typically presented with too many calories and unbalanced diets. To compensate for these changes in our collective existence, we need to search out opportunities to be active and exercise.

God has graced us with many wonderful gifts; life, a beautiful creation in which to live, and our bodies. Our response to the Creator’s great gifts should be to respect and care for them. One of the best ways we can show appreciation is to take care of our bodies. Exercise can be a form of worship.

Now that we have established the historic and spiritual need for exercise, let’s look at the quantity and quality requirements for exercise. The American Heart Association recommends 150-180 minutes of exercise a week, or, about 30-45 minutes a day, most days each week.¹ Let’s face it, in our lives which are over filled with activities and things that we “have to do”, it is unlikely that we will just find an extra 30 minutes each day to exercise. Instead, most of us will have to examine our daily routines, acknowledge a priority for exercise to benefit the length and quality of our life, and then, schedule the time for exercise…every day! Many people find it best to keep the time consistent so you are able to create a habit of exercise.

What, then, are proven and effective forms of exercise? For decades we have been offered fad exercise machines that advertise they will shed the pounds with minimal, or no effort. If you are old enough, you probably remember the popular vibrating belt machines that would shake your fat away. Although it was promoted for weight and fat loss, this device was originally intended to improve circulation for those too sick to exercise.² The product does not work for weight loss, but it can still be found in newer versions today. In the early 90’s the ThighMaster® was a huge TV exercise infomercial fad.³ It may have been effective at working the upper legs, if used regularly, however it falls into a typical trap of exercise gadgets in that it only worked one part of the body. This is true for the Ab Roller®, and other abdominal crunch products, originally brought out about 20 years ago, but still promoted today. These products are often seen in the corner of many living rooms, discarded because they do not provide a whole body workout and are not effective in weight control. The abdominal electrical stimulation belts were also purported to provide rock hard abs with minimal effort. While electrical stimulation is a good way of causing muscle twitch activity, the devices could cause rashes and burns if used inappropriately.⁴ The Federal Trade Commission also filed suits against several of these manufacturers because of claims that the devices could shed fat and that they were better than sit-ups and crunches.⁵ More fad equipment such as the pedal exerciser for under your desk, the ShakeWeight®,
sweat inducing wraps such as Belly Burner® and Belly Sauna®, and the hugely popular toning exercise shoes are all ineffective for a whole body workout. While targeted exercise can work for specific toning goals, it needs to be a part of a whole body workout for overall fitness and weight management.

Exercise video games have also become popular with Nintendo’s Wii products and Microsoft’s Kinect. Dance, Dance, Revolution® has also been a huge hit in some areas with young individuals spending hours dancing and jumping around. Studies show mixed results for individuals who partake in these games. Clearly, children in front of a television screen are being less physically active than those outside running around and playing sports, however it may be somewhat better than being a couch potato.

For an exercise routine to be beneficial to your heart you need to get your heart rate elevated. Many exercise experts recommend both cardiovascular as well as resistance/weight training. NordicTrack was a popular cross-country skiing exercise machine of the 80’s and early 90’s. It was effective at keeping people interested and providing cardiovascular exercise, but it has since been replaced by more popular machines and the company has faded into bankruptcy. Treadmills, exercise bikes, stair climbers, and elliptical machines are all good cardiovascular exercise machines. Bowflex® and Total Gym® are newer home gym products which have resistance and cardiovascular training capabilities as well.

Work out videos and programs have been popular, too, with older titles such as Sweatin’ to the Oldies® with Richard Simmons, Tai-bo Billy Blanks. Today, Zumba®, a dance exercise program, has become a favorite of many at home or in gyms. Other popular home programs are P90x® and Insanity®, which both push people to extreme levels of cardiovascular and strength training. All of these workout programs will work if you do them regularly.

Please note that it is important to check with your medical provider before starting any exercise program. If the physician sees no reason to limit exercise, you should not either. Also, don’t let mobility limitations stop you. You can still get a good workout sitting in a chair and lifting any weights you might have available such as canned foods, bags of flour, and the like. Be creative.

When deciding on exercise, there is no one best program; the choice will always be specific to each person. You do not need to have any of the expensive equipment that we have discussed above, or need any equipment at all. You need to pick an activity that will work for you and that you will do regularly. Whether it is using a machine, or a video, or walking, running, cycling, or swimming, you just need to do it. Pick something that you enjoy and stick with it. Some may prefer the intensity of a P90x® while others may enjoy family walks in the late evening before bed. It is a time to discuss the events of the day, be away from TV and the phone, and exercise with those you love. Remember to love your body as the gift from God that it is, and stay healthy.

References