

April 9, 2012

# Living Well

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## Gardening as Exercise

While gardening for many people is a fun activity or a way to grow food for their family, it is also a great way to get physical activity. Research has shown that regular physical activity can help strengthen bones and joints, lower blood pressure, help manage stress, improve sleep, and reduce your risk for heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend that adults get at least 30 minutes of daily exercise or 150 minutes of activity each week. Gardening uses all of the major muscle groups, the muscles that do most of the calorie burning. Your arms, legs, buttocks, shoulders, back and stomach all get a workout. Whether you are raking, bagging leaves, weeding, mowing with a push mower, digging or tilling, or planting seedlings you are expending energy and getting physical activity. Best of all, you can break these activities into short sessions over the course of the day without losing health benefits. For example, weeding for 10 minutes in the morning and raking and bagging leaves for 20 minutes in the afternoon gives you the same benefits as 30 minutes of continuous activity.

While gardening is a great form of physical activity, it is also important to remember to protect yourself and take precautions as you work in the sun and around insects, lawn and garden equipment, and chemicals. Consider the following health and safety tips as you enjoy gardening:

**\*Dress to protect.** Prevent exposure to harmful chemicals, insects, and the sun by wearing proper clothing and safety equipment. Use an insect repellent and sunscreen with SPF 15 or higher and UVA protection. Always check your clothing and body for ticks. Wear a hat with a wide rim to shade the face, head, ears, and neck.

**\*Know your limits in the heat.** Even being out for short periods of time in high temperatures can cause serious health problems. Monitor your activities and time in the sun to lower your risk for heat-related illness. Schedule outdoor activities carefully, and pace yourself.

**\*Stay hydrated.** Drink plenty of water. Whatever your outdoor activity, have water on hand to decrease the chance of dehydration. Avoid beverages with alcohol and drinks high in sugar, and stay away from caffeinated and carbonated beverages.

**\*Put safety first.** Be aware of the possible hazards to prevent injury. Read all instructions and labels before using chemicals and operating equipment. Check equipment before each use. Limit distractions while using equipment.

I would encourage you to spend time this spring working in your yard or garden. While gardening provides a great way to get physical activity, it can provide you with many benefits. For gardening tips or information on physical activity, contact the Flint Hills Extension District office in Council Grove at (620) 767-5136 or the office in Cottonwood Falls at (620) 273-6491.

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