

Online exercise advice rarely aligns with national physical activity guidelines

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Whether for convenience, cost or comfort, many people look to online resources for fitness and exercise information—especially when faced with fitness center and gym closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unfortunately, most internet-based recommendations for physical

activity don't match up with the guidelines supported by national health organizations, a recent study from Oregon State University found.

"Online [exercise](#) advice is incomprehensible for many and incomplete for everybody," said researcher Brad Cardinal, a kinesiology professor in OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences. "There wasn't anything we came across that was a complete message, and for many people, they would be left out of it altogether."

The dearth of reliable physical activity information online exacerbates existing health inequities, Cardinal said, because the information often is tailored for people who are already active and comfortable in the exercise world. For those who are trying to initiate physical activity for the first time, such incomplete information could lead to accidents or injuries, as well as feelings of stigmatization and exclusion.

The study, published earlier this month in the *Translational Journal of the American College of Sports Medicine*, analyzed fitness recommendations in 72 web articles from four types of organizations: government, commercial sites, professional associations and voluntary health agencies. Researchers compared the information with the national Physical Activity Guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The national guidelines advise adults to "move more and sit less" throughout the day. For "substantial health benefits," they say adults should complete 150 to 300 minutes (2.5 to 5 hours) of moderate aerobic activity, or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity, each week, spread across several days. Additional health benefits can be gained by exercising more than 300 minutes. The guidelines also recommend adults do some moderate- or greater-intensity strength-training activity that involves all muscle groups at least two days a week.

"Moderate" aerobic activity means something like a brisk walk, Cardinal said—about a pace of 3 or 4 miles per hour, when you can still comfortably hold a conversation.

The guidelines are mostly the same for adults ages 65 and older and for adults with disabilities or [chronic conditions](#), but include the caveat that if people in these groups are unable to complete the full recommendations, they should be as "physically active as their abilities and conditions allow."

In their analysis, the researchers found that professional associations such as nationally accredited groups of health care providers were the best at sharing accurate information, including total recommended minutes, spreading exercise throughout the week, and explaining how the time recommendation shifts based on the intensity of the activity.

Across all four types of sites the researchers studied, recommendations were more likely to be correct on aerobic exercise; very few included correct or complete information on muscle-strengthening activity.

While the national guidelines focus on "hearts and lungs," most online advice focuses on "abs and buns," Cardinal said—meaning the intent is more about improving appearance than about health.

His previous research has shown that online exercise messages also include a lot of hidden advertising, often for costly workout gear or "health food" products, which can add another perceived barrier to low-income folks trying to start exercising.

"For people who are inactive, and even people whose jobs include active labor but are hoping to develop an exercise routine, the online information was generally unhelpful," Cardinal said. "The majority of articles focused on those who were already involved in an exercise

program." This finding was affirmed in another study that examined the same web articles' production quality.

"It's good to reinforce the message for people who are active; it's good to give them encouragement. But if someone is new to this or has been away from [physical activity](#) for a while, the materials aren't really comprehensive for people," he said. "They're going to feel overwhelmed by them, and they're going to get an incomplete and inaccurate picture of what to do, and they could end up doing things wrong and potentially getting themselves hurt. The [online resources](#) might be doing more harm than good."

Lead author on the study was Jafrā D. Thomas, a 2019 Ph.D. graduate in kinesiology at OSU who is now an assistant professor at the California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

More information: Jafrā D. Thomas et al, How Credible Is Online Physical Activity Advice? The Accuracy of Free Adult Educational Materials, *Translational Journal of the ACSM* (2020). [DOI: 10.1249/TJX.0000000000000122](#)

Provided by Oregon State University

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