

What Makes a Workout Cardio?

From Marguerite Ogle,
Your Guide to Pilates.
What You Need to Know About Cardio Exercise

Cardio is short for cardiovascular, which refers to the heart.

Cardiovascular exercise is exercise that raises your heart rate and keeps it elevated for a period of time. Another name for it is aerobic exercise. The kinds of exercise that are associated with cardiovascular workouts are things like jogging, fast walking, and swimming where there is no break in the routine. Exercises that stop and start, like Pilates, are generally not considered cardio exercise, though Pilates can be done in a cardio way, and can certainly be combined with cardio workouts to great effect.

The benefits of cardio workouts

There is a hefty list of health benefits associated with doing cardio exercise. Here are some top reasons to include cardio in your workout routine:

- * It strengthens the heart
- * It strengthens the lungs and increases lung capacity
- * It boosts the metabolism, burns calories, and helps you lose weight
- * It helps reduce stress
- * It increases energy
- * It promotes restful sleep

Now that you are convinced of the benefits of cardio exercise, you might be wondering: "How high does my heart rate have to be and how long do I keep it there?" We will take a look at those questions and find out how to establish a target heart rate on the next page. But before we get in to any fancy stuff, there is a good rule of thumb to know about when you are doing cardio types of exercise: You should be able to talk. If you are too winded to speak comfortably, your heart rate is probably too high and you need to slow down.

Next, learn to calculate your target heart rate.

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How High Should My Heart Rate Be?

To get the most out of a cardio workout, you will first want to figure out what your maximum heart rate (beats per minute) is. To do that, subtract your age from 226 for women or 220 for men. Now, you don't want to workout at your maximum heart rate. You want to workout in your target heart rate zone, which the American Heart Association suggests is 50% to 75% of the maximum heart rate for healthy people. You would calculate more toward 50% if you are just getting in shape and more toward 75% if you are in great shape.

Here is a sample calculation for a 40-year-old woman just getting started in cardio workouts.

$226 - 40$ (her age) = 180 maximum heart rate (beats per minute)
 $180 \times .50 = 90$ heart beats per minute as her target heart rate

Make it easy on yourself when you are working out, by figuring that the number of beats you need in just 10 seconds will be your target heart rate divided by 6. In our sample case, 90 divided by 6 is 15. She will want to count 15 beats in 10 seconds to be at her target heart rate. You can also find many target heart rate calculators online.

Count Your Heart Beats Per Minute:

To figure out how many times your heart is beating in a minute, place two fingers at the back corner of your lower jaw and then slide down an inch or so until you feel your pulse through the carotid artery in your neck. Count the number of beats in 10 seconds and then multiply by 6 to get your beats per minute.

A heart rate monitor can be a very useful tool as you develop your cardio workouts. They save a lot of pulse counting and calculation time.

Compare Prices on Heart Rate Monitors:
Compare Prices

How Long Should I Keep My Heart Rate Up?

How long your cardio sessions should be depends on your level of fitness and your goals. The American Heart Association, in conjunction with the American College of Sports Medicine, recommends a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate aerobic activity five days per week, or at least 20 minutes of vigorous activity 3 days per week. These are minimums, but

you may still need to work up to these levels as you increase your aerobic fitness. The important thing is to begin a program.

* Please note that I have presented general guidelines for maximum and target heart rates that are given to healthy adults. If you are overweight or have other health issues, consult with your healthcare professional before beginning a cardio program.

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