

Staying Fit With Limb Loss

Amputees share their routines



Stan Backovsky

Finding the right exercise regimen with limb loss may take a little trial and error. But you don't have to be an athlete or a fitness enthusiast to exercise.

by Scott McNutt

Keeping fit is an important part of overall health, especially if you live with limb loss or other disabilities. Experts advise that a regular exercise routine is crucial for maintaining your well-being.

“Fitness is for *everybody*, whether you’re a beginner, recovering from an injury, or have a complex medical history,” says Jessica Sobolewski, MS, physical activity coordinator at MHealthy Wellness & Health Improvement Services in Ann Arbor, Michigan. “When developing an exercise program for individuals who’ve undergone an amputation, the majority of the research recommends following exercise prescription guidelines to include all areas of fitness, including aerobic, resistance and flexibility training. The combination of these three components will assist in an improved ability to perform normal activities of daily living (ADLs).”

Sobolewski also says that, for overall fitness, muscular fitness/strength training is vital to develop strength and endurance in the muscles of the legs and upper body so that those muscles do not tire too quickly. Strength is needed in the lower and upper extremities and core (stomach and back) muscles for ambulation and ADLs. The core muscles play a crucial role in standing and moving, so if the core is not strong, it will not be able to meet the physical demands made on it.



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Finding the right exercise regimen with limb loss may take a little trial and error. But you don't have to be an athlete or a fitness enthusiast to exercise. Here are examples of what some regular people with limb loss are doing to stay in shape.

Stan Backovsky, who is a right below-knee amputee, considers himself a recreational athlete. He is over 50 years old and uses tennis, golf and walking or hiking to stay in shape. He tries to play tennis 2 or 3 times a week for 2 to 3 hours at a time.

“Tennis has been a great choice,” says Backovsky. “Physically, it keeps me moving. It provides an opportunity to fine-tune my balance and coordination. It allows me to compete with able-bodied players in a competitive yet friendly environment. Golf has similar benefits at a less intense level.”

He's also tried cross-country skiing, volleyball, body surfing and cycling but says tennis fits his schedule the best. He started playing about 3 months after his amputation, slowly learning to move around the court. Backovsky recommends that people with limb loss who are considering starting an exercise regimen pick a sport that they think they would enjoy and that will challenge them.

“I would tell people, if they want to try a sport, do it,” he says. “They may have to have a little bit of a game plan on how to go about the details, but that should not discourage them. The Internet is full of examples of amputees

accomplishing some amazing things by refusing to be discouraged because something may be initially more challenging for them.”

Fortyish Jodie O'Connell lost her right arm in an industrial accident over 20 years ago. She now runs Destiny's Ride, a therapeutic horsemanship center working with amputees. She points out another important element of physical activity: mental well-being.

“It's a great stress reliever,” O'Connell says, noting with a chuckle that her young son once told her she needed to go riding when she was having a particularly stressful day. “When you are riding, it's almost like a meditation – it's like healing that goes on inside of you.”

O'Connell also credits her horses with helping her recover from her injury.

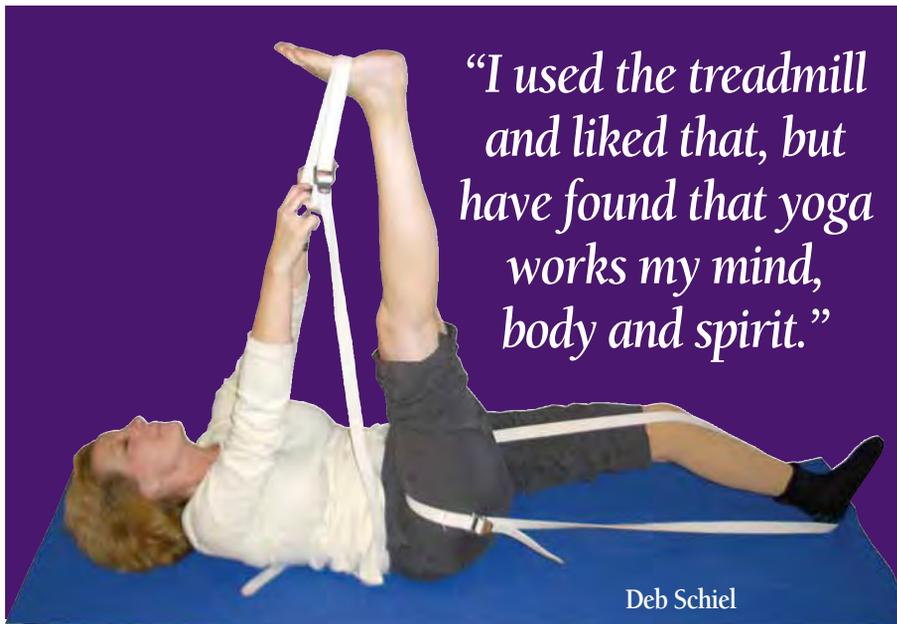
“I actually say that the horses saved my life,” she says. “I was back at the barn 4 weeks after losing my hand, relearning how to do everything and ride and all the fun stuff. It was great, tremendous healing for me, especially being so young.”

Although she sometimes walks and jogs, O'Connell notes that taking care of horses and riding them is a complete workout in itself. Cleaning stables, grooming horses and moving supplies takes a lot of muscle and a lot of energy.

“I get exercise by lifting hay bales or 50-pound bags of grain. Little things like that help build those muscles,” she says.

As for the riding itself, staying in the saddle and controlling the horse require plenty of agility and muscle control from O'Connell – and perhaps more mental acuity than a person with two hands would require.

“When I'm riding, I'm always thinking ahead of what that horse is doing because I could lose my balance much quicker than someone with both hands,” she says. “So learning how to



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Deb Schiel

balance and stay seated is really important. It takes a lot of concentration and energy, but it helps in so many different ways, including building up the core muscles, because you are using your legs and your hips and your stomach and your butt.”

Brooke Artesi, a CPO at Garden State Orthopaedics, who participates in rock climbing and kayaking events at the Extremity Games, demurs at calling herself physically fit.

“You can just go and kind of fudge it,” she says. “I’ve taken third [place] in kayaking the past 2 years. With the rock climbing, I haven’t placed at all.”

The 30 year-old, who lost her right leg below the knee due to trauma 15 years ago, also runs and does “boxing, weight lifting, cardio and machines” at a gym. This exercise she claims she does out of necessity.

“I’d be pretty fat if I didn’t do all that,” laughs Artesi. “That’s pretty much what it comes down to.”

The kayaking, however, she enjoys. “Kayaking is fun,” she says. “That, I love. I’m all about it. In the summer, I keep it on my car, and whenever I can go, I go. It’s easy. I mean, it sounds like, ‘Oh, Brooke kayaks, Brooke runs,’ but I am not in whitewater rapids. I’m just in lakes, where I can put on my iPod and scoot around.”

Artesi has some simple advice for folks who want to start exercising: Just do something.

“We get patients in the clinic every day who haven’t done anything in years,” she says. “I tell them, just do something. Start slow. Just go take a walk around the block. Even if it’s just walking around the block, it may not seem like a lot, but even a little exercise can make a difference.”

Deb Schiel, who lost her left leg above the knee to cancer in 2000, celebrated her 50th birthday last year. She began doing yoga over a year ago and now uses it to stay fit. One thing she likes about yoga is that she is able to participate “with all the others without calling attention to my limb loss.”

Schiel tried other types of exercise, but finds yoga especially satisfying. And the benefits are manifold.

“I used the treadmill and liked that, but have found that yoga works my mind, body and spirit,” she explains. “I may feel tired when I start my practice, but after the class, I’m restored, not tired. I never really set out to get tone; I just wanted to participate in a group regimen where I could fit in without calling attention to my loss. Yoga has allowed me to more clearly see my journey, reinforcing my ‘can do’ attitude. I realize I really have no limitations, just modifications.” ■