

The Shape You're In

For a long time, humans didn't have to worry about keeping fit. They had to work hard to find food and fight off predators. Now, people in rich countries like ours just have to walk to the refrigerator to find food, and the only predators we fight are in videogames. So we have to work to stay in shape.

But what does it mean to be "in shape?" Strong? Fast? Slim? It's really a combination of factors, and it's not based on how you look. Thin people can be in terrible shape, and heavy people can be in good shape.

We are going to look at four different aspects of fitness: strength, cardio (short for cardiovascular fitness), flexibility and balance.

Strength:

Your muscles are long bands of fiber that connect to a bone at each end. When the fibers pull tight, or contract, they pull on the bone. Each muscle is paired with another muscle that pulls the bone back again. So, your bicep—the muscle at the front of your upper arm—pulls your lower arm up towards you. The tricep—on the back of your upper arm—pulls the lower arm back down. You can build stronger muscles by lifting or pushing heavy weights.



Cardio:

Having strong muscles wouldn't be much good if you got tired just running across a basketball court. Cardiovascular fitness is a measure of how good you are at getting oxygen to your cells. It's a matter of your lung capacity, heart strength, and circulation—the amount of blood your blood vessels carry and how fast they can allow it to flow. Doing exercises that get your heartrate up and keep it there help improve cardio fitness.



Flexibility:

Most sports and other athletic activities require a good range of motion. That means you have to bend or extend your body. If you focus too much on strengthening your muscles, you can lose flexibility. Slowly stretching your muscles can help maintain flexibility.



Balance:

The best athletes can perform complex activities like catching a pass, shooting a soccer ball, or executing a dance move without falling or losing control of their bodies. That takes balance. Practicing difficult balancing challenges can improve it.



Activity Instructions



Before You Start

On a scale of one to ten, how fit do you think you are now? On the same scale, where would you like to be? Whatever your answer, this activity will help you reach your goal.

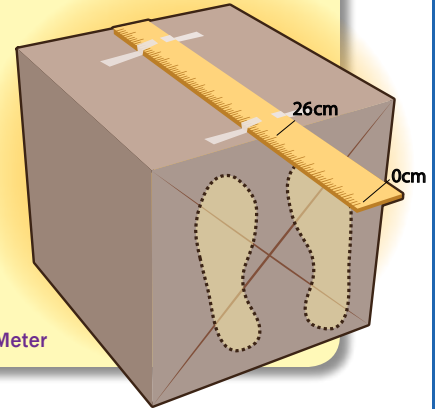
What You'll Need

- A partner for the next six weeks
- A Fitness Factor Journal
- A Flex-O-Meter
- Use of a stopwatch or clock with second hand

Getting Ready

Build the Flex-O-Meter by taping the measuring stick to the top of the box so that 26 cm sticks out. So the 26 cm mark will be right at the edge of the box and the 0 cm mark will stick out the furthest.

Warm up for at least five minutes.



Flex-O-Meter

How To Play

1. Write your name, your partner's name and the date on your Fitness Factor Journal. As you do each of the following exercises, write the results in your Journal for both you and your partner.

2. See how many regular, or modified pushups you can do in one minute. If you can complete five regular ones with good form (back straight, chest touching the floor, and then pressing all the way up), do those. If not, do the modified push-ups with your knees on the ground.

3. See how many Super Heroes you can do. Stand straight up, then bend down at the knees till your bottom almost touches the ground and then jump up as high as you can. When you land, go right back down into the bend and jump up again. See how many you can do in a minute. Stop if you get dizzy!

4. To test your balance, stand straight up and slowly raise one foot and place it on the side of your other leg. Then raise your hands up to the sky. Have your partner time you as you stay in the position for

as long as you can, up to a minute. Write down how long you could stay in this position.

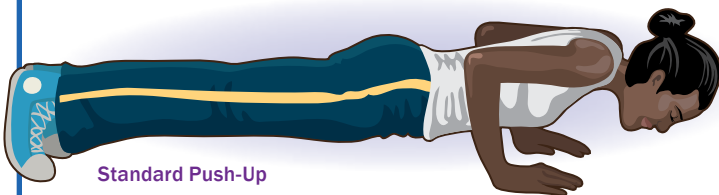
5. To test your flexibility, sit on the floor with your feet up against the front of the Flex-O-Meter. Reach forward with both hands to touch the highest number you can on the ruler. Try this three times, and write down how far you reached on your third try.

6. Add your four scores to your partner's scores. That's your Team Start Score.

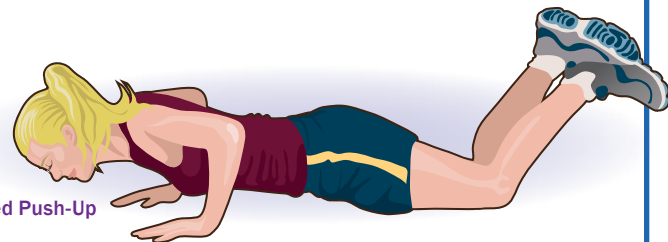
7. Improve your fitness. Meet with your partner as often as you can—every day, if possible—and work together on the exercises in your Fitness Factor Journal. You don't need to do all of them, but pick at least one from each category and exercise for at least 20 minutes.

8. Once each week, re-do the challenges in Steps 2 through 5 and write the results in your Journal. Your teacher will chart the results of your group on the Fitness Factor poster.

9. After Week 6, figure out your Team Finish Score and compare it to your Start Score.



Standard Push-Up



Modified Push-Up

What did you learn?

Six weeks is a short time. If you keep exercising and keep improving at the same rate, how much would you improve in 48 weeks (less than a year)? There's a blank

exercise page at the back of your Fitness Factor Journal. Photocopy it and keep an exercise journal. How long can you keep it going? All year? Till you graduate? All your life?