

Keeping fit to succeed

A seafarer's lifestyle choices will directly impact their health. Exercise is a key component of this equation. Dr Abaya of Health Metrics Inc. draws on his great experience of seafarer health matters to make the case for exercise on board ship. He also provides details of simple exercises that can be used by seafarers to help maintain their fitness.



Antonio Roberto M Abaya
Medical Director, Health Metrics Inc
T +632 795 1234
E aabaya@healthmetrics.com.ph



Changes in lifestyle include both diet and exercise in order to prevent these so-called lifestyle diseases.

Keeping fit or staying healthy are difficult propositions for seafarers, considering the amount of labour one goes through on a daily basis. Physical activity is difficult, and resting or relaxing seems the easier option in down-time. A shift in attitude is required to make seafarers decide to start exercising, and keep going.

Why exercise

The seafarer must realise that there is a purpose in keeping fit. So-called lifestyle diseases can be life-threatening: hypertension, diabetes, hyperuricemia and fatty liver disease. Scientific evidence (Harvard Medical School, National Institute of Health, American Heart Association, European Association for the Study of Diabetes) has shown that changes in lifestyle can help to prevent and even slow down or stop the progression of these diseases.

In addition, when one exercises, there is a release of the 'happy hormones' serotonin and endorphins, promoting a sense of happiness, well-being and contentment. Exercise increases physical and mental stamina, and is an immediate energy booster.

Hence, with the knowledge that both diet and exercise may lead us to the greater good (being disease-free), it may be easier to appreciate the sacrifices one endures and make all the effort seem worthwhile.

How to exercise

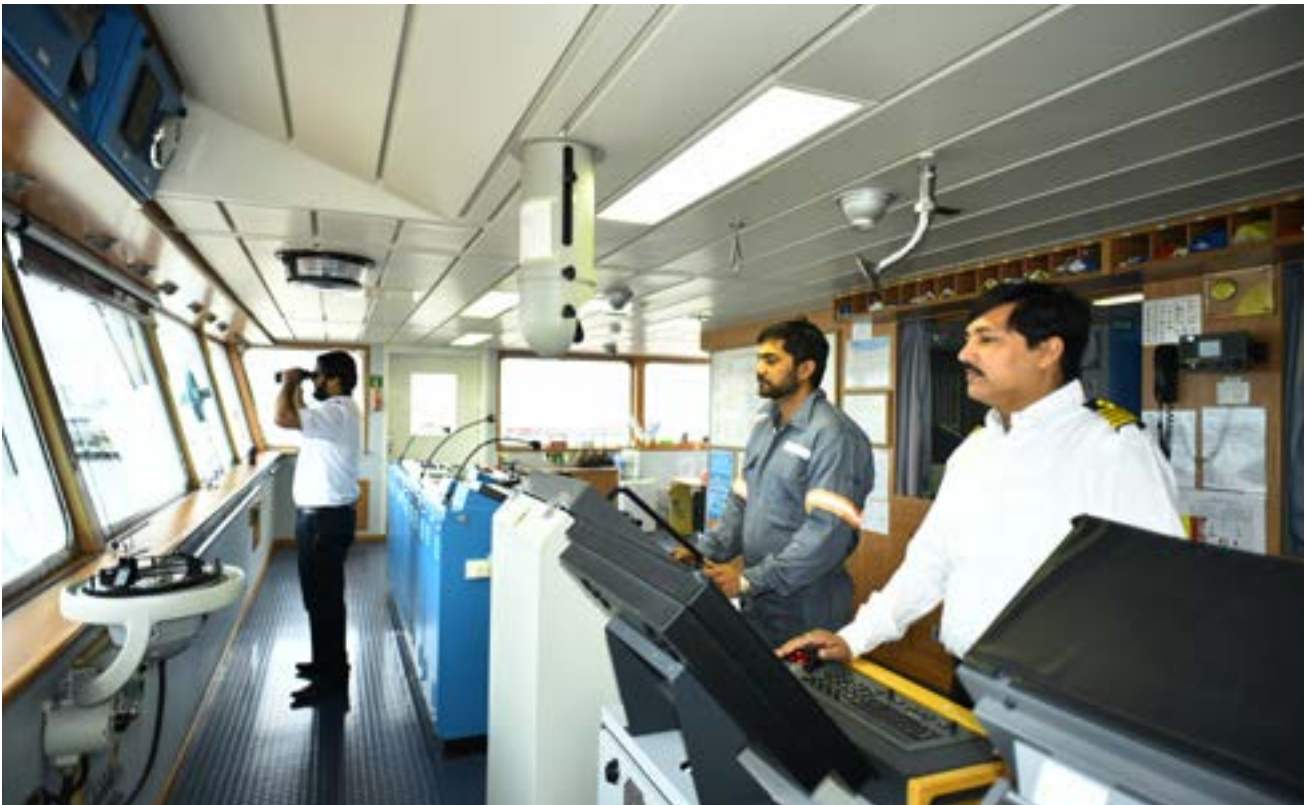
One should engage in at least 30 minutes of exercise a day to improve physical fitness and to provide a mental break from the daily routine. A basic cardio workout maintains the cardiovascular fitness by increasing heart rate and improving muscle tone.

Where to exercise

Useful basic equipment in the gyms on board ships includes:

- a treadmill
- basic weights from 2kg up to 10kg
- stretching mats and balls.

Doing exercise with others can help to maintain motivation and commitment. Team sports provide a good physical and mental workout, as these both improve the cardiovascular system and promote camaraderie from team-building in these competitive sports. Examples could include cricket (on a large enough ship), basketball, tug of war or ping pong. However, one can still do exercises alone.



Example routine

Here are eight simple exercises which managers could promote amongst their crew. These exercises are easy and good for confined spaces such as a cabin. They should take around eight minutes a day if done properly.



Do each activity for 45 seconds, resting 15 seconds between each one and remaining hydrated throughout:

- running on the spot
- jumping jacks
- lunges
- push-ups
- mountain climbers
- squats
- leg raises
- planks.

If advanced age or the presence of physical limitations restricts one's capacity to do all of these exercises, walking 10,000 steps a day has been shown to improve cardiovascular health. One burns calories and walking these distances also increases exercise tolerance. Walking the length of the ship many times a day can easily bring one close to the 10,000 steps or 9 kilometers. If crew members stick to this goal of 10,000 steps a day, it adds up to burning about 3,500 extra calories a week, which is a steady, realistic and achievable goal. However, any amount of activity beyond what crew are currently doing will likely benefit their health.

Conclusion

Whilst seafarers are restricted in what activities they can engage in because of the limitations of their environment, there are many ways to keep fit on board a ship. These activities can help reduce the risk of lifestyle-related diseases. Managers should encourage seafarers to consider their activity levels and take the necessary steps to ensure that they retain a reasonable state of fitness during their contracts.

Even moderate increases in activity levels can have a positive impact on the state of an individual's health. Simple exercises such as those listed can mean the difference between a long career or one that is cut short by ill health.