Measuring Physical Activity Intensity

The intensity of physical activity, or how hard your body is working, is typically categorized as light, moderate, or vigorous based on the amount of energy or effort a person expends in performing the activity.

Talk Test

The talk test method of measuring intensity is simple. A person who is active at a light intensity level should be able to sing while doing the activity. One who is active at a moderate intensity level should be able to carry on a conversation comfortably while engaging in the activity. If a person becomes winded or too out of breath to carry on a conversation, the activity can be considered vigorous.

Metabolic Equivalent (MET) Level

The metabolic equivalent, or MET, is another way of measuring physical activity intensity level. Although the intensity of certain activities is commonly characterized as light, moderate, or vigorous, many activities can be classified in any one or all three categories simply on the basis of the level of personal effort involved in carrying out the activity (i.e., how hard one is working to do the activity). For example, one can bicycle at intensities ranging from very light to very vigorous.

1 MET = the energy (oxygen) used by the body as you sit quietly, perhaps while talking on the phone or reading a book.

The harder your body works during the activity, the higher the MET.

- Any activity that burns 3 to 5.9 METs is considered moderate-intensity physical activity.
- Any activity that burns 6.0 METs or more is considered vigorous-intensity physical activity.