



Life on the Rebound

Bounce your way
to better health
this winter

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Bad knees, fallen arches, brittle bones, back problems — there are plenty of reasons not to engage in activities that put stress on the lower limbs. Pounding the pavement for an extended period of time, whether jogging or playing a sport, batters the feet, legs and lower back. If your body isn't able to handle the strain, even a well-intentioned effort to stay fit may exacerbate existing ailments and even cause new ones.

Fortunately, there's a device that allows people who normally can't run or jump to do just that, while improving coordination, balance and bone mass. It's called a rebounder — fitness-freak parlance for mini-trampoline — and it can help put the youthful spring back in your step —literally. Think your jogging days are over? Think again. A rebounder will let you run indoors this winter when the roads and sidewalks are too icy even for walking. What's more, it's really fun.



BACK KICK Holding the stabilizer bar, tilt forward slightly and kick each leg behind you one at a time. "This helps strengthen the lower back and lifts the buttocks," says David Hall of Cellerciser.com, who recommends doing a range of rebounder exercises.



KNEE LIFT Marching on the mat with knees raised up high provides intense aerobic activity without jarring. The hips move down into the mat, allowing the ligaments and muscles along the spine to stretch gently. This exercise can be done slowly or at a sprint.



SIT BOUNCE This is a fun variation that strengthens the muscles of the abdomen, back and thighs. It can even give the muscles of the shoulders and chest a workout. It's also great for older or frailer people or those whose balance is shaky.

JUMPING FOR JOY

"When I first saw an article on the benefits of rebounding, I wanted to try it immediately," says Heather Porter (a pseudonym), a 59-year-old Toronto high-school substitute teacher who sought relief for ascites, a painful accumulation of fluid in the abdomen, which she developed after abdominal surgery for cancer. During an online search for options, she stumbled on a website that touted rebounding as a means of aiding the flow of lymph, the fluid that bathes all cells and transports infection-fighting white blood cells to trouble spots.

While claims that the gravitational forces of rebounding somehow aid the lymph vessels are anecdotal (rather than scientifically proven), any physical activity — especially a low-impact, highly efficient one such as rebounding — is useful, since the lymphatic system requires muscular contraction to circulate its fluid throughout the body. Moreover, even in her convalescent state, Heather was able to use her rebounder several times a day, albeit in short 10-minute bouts.

"I'd put the TV on the dance-music channel and run on the spot, changing to five straight-up-and-down jumps every once in awhile in the hope of aiding lymph drainage," she says. "It was fun and it felt pretty good. And even though my abdomen had to be drained three times in the next few months after surgery, I think the rebounder did help get things circulating, and it gave me a feeling of taking a concrete step toward my well-being."

To some, rebounders may seem more like toys than serious exercise equipment, but that's just testimony to what gleeful childish fun it is to use them (unlike, say, a stairclimber or treadmill). And despite its waxing and waning popularity over the years, rebounding is no fad. Along with its aerobic-exercise potential, it is increasingly being used to rehabilitate injured patients in the physiotherapy clinic and at home.

"For patients who've sustained lower-limb injuries, rebounders are excellent tools for retraining them in proprioception — the ability to know where their body is in relation

to the surrounding space," says Lilianne Moussa, a physiotherapist at a Kinatex sports medicine and physiotherapy clinic in Montreal.

That's because the mat of a rebounder is less stable than the ground and therefore requires better control of your equilibrium to stand on without toppling over. Moussa prescribes several readaptive exercises for her clients. These include simple squatting or standing on the mat and squatting or standing on one foot on the mat, then progressing to lifting one leg and the opposite arm in tandem. Another move is going from a one-legged stance to a squat while the other leg is placed on a Swiss ball. The next step is doing all of these with the eyes closed!

To clients who are able, Moussa recommends doing these barefoot and, if possible, without a stabilizer bar — ensuring, of course, that there are no sharp or dangerous objects in the vicinity in case of a fall. But the frail or elderly, people with poor balance or those who live to do high jumps should always use a fixed stabilizer bar to prevent accidents.

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WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Relatively inexpensive rebounders can be found for less than \$100 at most fitness and sporting-goods stores. "I paid \$39 for my first rebounder," says Heather. Good-quality units, however, generally cost between \$150 and \$300, and they can go as high as \$600. Top brands include Bellicon, Cellerciser, Needak, ReboundAir and Urban Rebounder, all of which have online stores. In the higher price range, models should have barrel-shaped springs of high-carbon steel, which last longer and provide a more even bounce than tube-shaped springs.

In addition, look for a model with a Permatron (i.e., industrial-strength polypropylene) mat. This will be weatherproof, will resist stretching and will provide a firmer, more even surface than nylon or canvas mats. The connections between the unit's springs and mat should be seamless, without any sharp protruding metal bits, and the spring cover should be thick and durable.

The frame should be machine-welded steel for extra durability, with a powder-coated or enamel-paint finish to prevent chipping

or rusting. Half- or quarter-folding models should have rounded hinges, to avoid injuring fingers or catching on carpeting, and they should be foldable without removal of the spring cover. Legs should also be foldable for easy storage, with spring-loaded hinges to prevent them from collapsing while the rebounder is in use and polymer plastic foot caps that won't crack or scratch your floor.

Whichever brand or model you choose, bouncing on a quality rebounder should be soft, effortless and quiet. The mat must never touch the floor and should remain relatively flat, not slope sharply inward to the centre (which puts your ankles, knees, hips and spine out of alignment). Contrary to some manufacturers' claims, springs, mats and other parts may wear out, so consider the warranty coverage and the cost of replacing parts.

And bear in mind that, at heart, a rebounder is a way to make indoor exercise fun. "Even in the dark days of winter, it's hard to feel depressed when you're bouncing up and down like a little kid," says Heather. 🦋