This is a frequent question for people starting to exercise. As physical activity promoters, we want to encourage people to work out hard enough to get training benefits without pushing them unnecessarily.

The target heart rate can be a method of finding out whether your heart rate is in the range for your age but is not always practical since the participant has to stop to take their pulse and perform some mental calculations. There are also some individual variances and it is very difficult to know exactly what someone’s maximum heart range is.

Dr. Robert Goode, from the Department of Physiology and Exercise Science Unit of the University of Toronto, recommends using two simple measures: the “Breath Sound Check” and the “Talk Test” for general fitness purposes. These allow participants to quickly judge themselves if they are getting fitness and health benefits from their aerobic workout.

The principle of the Talk Test is simple: you should be capable of having a conversation while exercising. If you are having difficulty talking and are out of breath, you are working too hard and have reached an anaerobic level.

The Breath Sound Check is a way to ensure a minimal level is reached: you should be able to hear your breathing when you perform aerobic exercise. Goode emphasizes that you want to reach the “Ventilatory Threshold”, which is that point where you just start to hear your breathing.

To establish your Ventilatory Threshold, jog slowly or walk vigorously for one minute. Increase the pace so that the sound of breathing is audible, and maintain the pace that gives you that sound level.

Often you can hear your breathing merely walking up a set of stairs, especially when carrying groceries, books or a brief case. Those people who are regularly physically active have higher Ventilatory Thresholds and are able to do more before breathing sounds are audible. Those who are less active, can hear their breathing much sooner.

The Breath Sound Check and the Talk Test are good tools that can be used in combination and provide individuals a personalized, yet simple, criteria. “Just listen, can you hear your breathing and are you able to talk?”

The Breath Sound Check and the Talk Test approximately correspond to the “moderate” level of activity recommended by the
Physical Activity Guide. Participants should be encouraged to start slowly, perhaps spending six minutes a day at that level (plus a few minutes to lead up to it and slow down) and building up activity to 30-60 minutes a day, 4-7 days a week.


Special thanks to Bob Goode, Department of Physiology and Exercise Science Unit, Faculties of Medicine and Physical Education and Health, University of Toronto.