

Get Fit with Your Family at These Five South Florida Parks

Quarantines, shut-downs, and dismal headlines were not kind to the American waistline.

During stay-at-home orders in March and April 2020, some of us gained more than 1.5 pounds per month, according to a recent study. A February 2021 poll by the American Psychological Association showed that 42% of respondents reported gaining more weight than intended in 2020. The median weight gain was 15 pounds; however, 10% of respondents said they gained more than 50 pounds.

That's cause for concern, for several reasons. Even with COVID-19 vaccinations increasing and cases decreasing, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns that obesity may increase the risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and possibly triple the risk of hospitalization. Pandemic aside, obesity attracts a host of other health problems, including diabetes and heart disease.

Slow and steady wins the race

As we slowly return to a sense of normalcy, it's time to get off the couch, turn off the television, and start moving. The road to physical fitness is really that simple, says Lee Kaplan, M.D., director of the University of Miami Sports Medicine Institute. "Don't try to solve all of your problems at once. Start easy, with family walks or bike rides through your neighborhood." Build strength and endurance gradually by adding an extra mile or extra minutes to your daily walk or ride. And don't forget to stretch. If your body isn't warmed up, you're more likely to injure yourself while working out.

Exercise not only makes us look and feel better, it improves our moods and sleep, strengthens our bones, and reduces our risk of certain diseases. Another benefit of outdoor activity is a boost of vitamin D. “Even in South Florida, vitamin D deficiencies exist,” says Dr. Kaplan.

Before lacing up your sneakers or jumping on your bike, schedule an annual check-up for every member of your family. “Many Americans skipped their annual exam in 2020. Talk to your doctor about your risk factors and for advice on making simple diet and exercise lifestyle changes,” Dr. Kaplan says.

South Florida: It’s a park-filled paradise

With South Florida’s plentiful parks, it’s easier to follow Dr. Kaplan’s advice to “be consistent” with exercise. To beat the heat, work out in the early morning or evening. (Use common sense in public places. Don’t go alone after dark or in the wee hours of the morning. Bring a friend if that’s the only time you can exercise.

Dr. Kaplan says drink plenty of water, wear sunscreen, a hat, and breathable performance clothing that keeps you cool by wicking moisture away from your skin. A walk, run, or bike ride by the breezy beach is another way to stay active when temperatures soar.

To add variety and fun to your fitness routine, dedicate one or two weekends a month to exploring some of Dr. Kaplan’s favorite South Florida parks:

Peacock Park, Miami

Keep company with the proud birds in this urban oasis where families can play basketball or kickball together. For a more leisurely pace, stroll the boardwalk bridge spanning scenic Biscayne Bay. Extend your workout by walking or running along Bayshore Drive to the bridge and back. With bike racks and picnic tables, this

park is ideal for pedaling around Coconut Grove, then returning for a post-workout snack. Kids enjoy climbing the park's shade trees while parents take in the waterfront views.

Tropical Park, Miami

While famous for its Equestrian Center, Tropical Park welcomes people, too. Need some terrain in your daily run? Follow the example of local high school track teams who train by running up the park's hill. You could also explore miles of paved pathways on foot, bike, or pushing a stroller. Tennis courts, a boxing center, bike rentals, and fitness zones round out the activities. And don't forget the family dog - a no-leash "bark park" gives Rover room to roam.

David T. Kennedy Park, Miami

Spend an afternoon here, and you'll wonder why you ever toiled under fluorescent lights in the gym. Stretching more than 20 acres along Biscayne Bay, Kennedy's waterfront vistas, grassy lawn, and abundant shade trees make for a picturesque workout. Families can choose sides for a lively game of volleyball on one of three sand courts. Parents, teens, and grandparents appreciate the low-impact rubber asphalt running paths, exercise stations with instructional signage, and outdoor resistance-based gym. In addition, a spacious playground invites your youngest family members to burn off some energy.

Gratigny Plateau Park, Miami

A public-private partnership transformed four parcels of land into this nicely landscaped park that spans four blocks. Walking paths wind through the property, where families enjoy a playground designed for toddlers, a butterfly garden, and an outdoor gym with fitness stations.

Brian Piccolo Sports Park and Velodrome, Cooper City

This Broward County destination honors its namesake sports star with an assortment of facilities: softball, soccer, and cricket fields, racquetball and tennis courts, and outdoor exercise equipment. The park is home to Florida's only velodrome, where competitive and recreational cyclists and in-line skaters zip around a paved 333.3-meter track. When not circling the track, cyclists build endurance on the Piccolo Road Course's 500- and 800-meter loops. Several sports leagues and professional athletes play and practice on the fields and velodrome. The park's pathways are open to everyone. While walking, jogging, or cycling, you might spot a whimsical bystander. Despite being a hub of human activity, Piccolo Sports Park is home to burrowing owls and is situated on The Great Florida Birding Trail.

To make an appointment at the University of Miami Sports Medicine Institute, call 305-689-5555, option 2.

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