“Meet Sam,” announces a female host as the program begins. In a lively animated segment, viewers are introduced to a male teen who has trouble walking a mile, climbing the stairs and getting through gym class. Next, we meet Tracy. Unlike Sam, she’s able to do physical activities with ease. While Sam feels exhausted most of the time and his self-esteem is low, Tracy is happy, has higher self-esteem and a positive body image. Plus, she has a much lower risk of developing serious diseases such as heart disease or diabetes.

“The only thing separating these two is physical fitness,” notes the host. She lists even more benefits of fitness: feeling better, more energy, healthy weight, better sleep and better mental health. “But what exactly does it mean to be fit?” she asks. Viewers then meet four real teens—Megan, Jaime, Jake and Kenisha—who explain what fitness means to them. Their comments include feeling healthy and confident, being able to perform physical activities from start to finish and a happier mood.

In a second animated segment, Sam and Tracy return to illustrate what fitness isn’t: just having huge muscles or being very skinny. “The pressure society puts on us to look a certain way can be intense,” notes the host. She reminds viewers that someone who has big muscles but can’t jog a mile is not fit and that extreme thinness is very unhealthy and linked to serious eating disorders.

Next, the program introduces David Jack, a youth fitness expert at TeamWorks Sports Centers in Acton, MA. “Just as long as you’re active, just as long as you’re sweating and your body is moving in different ways and you’re having fun—that is the perfect definition of fitness,” he says. He emphasizes that teens don’t need expensive equipment or access to special facilities to get in shape.

The host lists the five essential elements of physical fitness: cardiovascular endurance, muscle strength, flexibility, balance and coordination, and body composition. The program focuses on the first element, cardiovascular endurance. The host explains that this is the ability of the heart, lungs and blood to deliver oxygen to the muscles during prolonged exercise. Viewers learn that performing aerobic exercise—activity that uses large muscle groups like the legs, arms and hips and can be sustained for 20 to 30 minutes—is a great way to improve cardiovascular endurance.

Kenisha then describes her love for soccer and how her coach inspired her to take up running to improve her endurance. “Every morning I wake up at five to go running,” she explains. “The first time I made it all the way around without stopping, I was so happy. I was like, okay, I can do this again.”

The host explains that anaerobic exercise also helps improve cardiovascular endurance. This exercise involves short bursts of energy that force the muscles to work without using oxygen. Viewers learn that alternating anaerobic activity with slower-paced aerobic activity (called doing intervals) is a great way to strengthen the heart without wearing them out.
David Jack lists a variety of activities that improve cardiovascular endurance, including swimming, biking, hiking, running, lifting weights, playing sports and riding horses. “Anything that gets your heart rate up and gets us pumping blood and pumping oxygen throughout the body will improve our cardiovascular system,” he notes. Teens should work on their cardiovascular endurance three times a week for 45 to 60 minutes at a time, performing their chosen activity at a moderate to vigorous pace.

The host then makes the important point that teens new to exercising should check with their doctors before getting started on a workout routine. A doctor can help them get started and build endurance gradually and safely.

Next, the teens describe their favorite cardiovascular fitness routines: playing sports, riding bikes, dancing and running.

The second element of physical fitness is muscle strength, or the amount of strength one’s muscles can produce. Resistance exercises that make the muscles work against a force, such as a dumbbell or one’s body weight, improve strength by tearing down and rebuilding muscle fibers.

Jaime shares his passion for wrestling and weight lifting. “When I first started out, I felt like I wasn’t strong at all,” he says. But through regular workouts that incorporated weight lifting and body-weight exercises like push-ups and pull-ups, he improved his strength. “Now, I can get out on the mat and keep up,” he says.

David Jack explains, “One of the safest ways to build strength is using your own body weight” through squats, push-ups and pull-ups. Teens should work on muscle strength three days a week to promote lean tissue and burn calories. Jaime demonstrates the correct push-up form. Viewers learn that the average number of push-ups a boy between 15 and 17 can do in one set is 30-37; for girls in that age range, it’s 16 push-ups.

The program moves to the third element of fitness: flexibility, or the ability of a joint to move through its full range of motion. Megan describes her love for dancing and the importance of flexibility in all types of dance. “Before you stretch, you feel kind of tight,” she says. “By the end of dancing, you just feel like spaghetti.”

David Jack explains that teens can work on flexibility by simply moving in different ways, through activities like swimming, running, gymnastics, dancing and throwing balls. “Beyond that, we also do some specific stretching,” he says.

Next, the program tackles balance and coordination—the fourth element of fitness. Balance is the body’s ability to control itself; coordination is the ability to use all the body systems together.
as a unit to perform a task. Jake describes his favorite activities: running, baseball, basketball, Ultimate Frisbee and soccer. He notes that coordination is very important in his sports, especially when batting in baseball and playing goalie in soccer.

David Jack tells viewers that any movement-based activity will improve balance and coordination. Doing challenging activities forces the body to get out of its comfort zone and boosts balance and coordination even faster. Jack describes several ways to evaluate these elements, including the ability to stand on one leg, catch and throw a ball, kick a ball, skip and do jumping jacks.

Next, viewers learn that the fifth element of fitness, body composition, is the proportion of fat, lean muscle, water and bones in the body. Everyone needs a certain amount of body fat to be healthy, but too much increases the risk of health problems like diabetes, stroke and heart disease. The host notes that teen girls should have 25 percent body fat or less, while teen boys should aim for 20 percent body fat or less.

David Jack returns to explain that the amount of food one takes in and the amount of calories burned during exercise are the two most important factors in determining one’s body composition. A calorie is a unit of energy, which the body uses to fuel all activities. To maintain a healthy weight, the number of calories a person eats should balance out with the number he or she burns through exercise.

“Not all calories are created equal,” notes the host. She advises teens to choose nutritious foods such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products and lean proteins. Junk foods—like candy, soda and chips—should be avoided because they pack lots of calories without healthy nutrients.

The host adds that cutting down on unhealthy calories is only half of the equation—burning calories through exercise is also important. “Your body naturally burns calories every day just by being alive,” she says. “Being active increases the number of calories you burn.” David Jack recommends starting out slowly—for example, if a teen plays video games for three hours every day, he or she should first cut it down to two hours and add more physical activity during that time. “Just find something that you enjoy doing and get moving,” says Jack. “If you’re moving, you’re headed in the right direction.”

Finally, the host reviews the five elements of fitness. She explains that the best workout routines combine exercises that improve all five elements and let teens be active almost every day. The host puts in an encouraging word. “Challenging your body will make you tired and sore at first, but don’t give up! You can do it.” David Jack lists great sources of help for teens just getting started with fitness: gym teachers, doctors, school nurses, personal trainers and more experienced friends.
The program wraps up with the teens reminding viewers of all of the benefits of physical fitness. “You have the choice—would you rather be exhausted or energized?” asks the host. “Have a lower self-esteem and a worse mood, or feel happier and better about yourself?” She emphasizes that getting active is the difference between those choices. She closes with, “Everyone can get fit. The benefits are too great to pass up. Why not start today?”