

AgePage

Exercise and Physical Activity: Getting Fit For Life

“After walking on a treadmill at the local community center, I knew I’d be happier outside. So, I got a step counter and started walking in my neighborhood. Since then, I’ve seen yellow tulips bloom in spring and red dogwood leaves drop in fall. I always come home with more energy and happy to go on with the rest of the day.”
Marian (age 77)

“Both my wife and I have heart problems. About 2 years ago, we joined our local health club, where we do both endurance and strength training exercises. On the off days, we walk near our house. It’s been life-saving for us.”
Bob (age 78)



These older adults are living proof that exercise and physical activity are good for you, no matter how old you are. In fact, staying active can help you:

- ◆ Keep and improve your strength so you can stay independent.
- ◆ Have more energy to do the things you want to do.
- ◆ Improve your balance.
- ◆ Prevent or delay some diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.
- ◆ Perk up your mood and reduce depression.

You don't need to buy special clothes or belong to a gym to become more active. Physical activity can and should be part of your everyday life. Find things you like to do. Go for brisk walks. Ride a bike. Dance. Work around the house. Garden. Climb stairs. Swim. Rake leaves. Try different kinds of activities that keep you moving. Look for new ways to build physical activity into your daily routine.

Four Ways to Be Active

To get all of the benefits of physical activity, try all four types of exercise — 1) endurance, 2) strength, 3) balance, and 4) flexibility.

1. Be sure to get at least 30 minutes of activity that makes you breathe hard on most or all days of the week. That's called an **endurance** activity because it builds your energy or "staying power." You don't have to be active for 30 minutes all at once. Ten minutes at a time is fine. Just make sure you are active for a total of 30 minutes most days.

How hard do you need to push yourself? If you can talk without any trouble at all, you are not working hard enough. If you can't talk at all, it's too hard.

2. Keep using your muscles. **Strength** exercises build muscles. When you have strong muscles, you can get up from a chair by yourself, you can lift your grandchildren, and you can walk through the park.

Keeping your muscles in shape helps prevent falls that cause problems like broken hips. You are less likely to fall when your leg and hip muscles are strong.



3. Do things to help your **balance**. Try standing on one foot, then the other. If you can, don't hold on to anything for support. Get up from a chair without using your hands or arms. Every now and then walk heel-to-toe. When you walk this way, the toes of the foot in back should almost touch the heel of the foot in front.

4. **Stretch**. Stretching can help you be more flexible. Moving more freely will make it easier for you to reach down to tie your shoes or look over your shoulder when you back the car out of your driveway. Stretch when your muscles are warmed up. Don't stretch so far that it hurts.

Who Should Exercise?

Almost anyone, at any age, can do some type of physical activity. You can still exercise even if you have a long-term condition like heart disease or diabetes. In fact, physical activity may help. For most older adults, brisk walking,

riding a bike, swimming, weight lifting, and gardening, are safe, especially if you build up slowly. But, check with your doctor if you are over 50 and you aren't used to energetic activity. You also should check with your doctor if you have:

- ◆ a chronic disease, such as diabetes or heart disease
- ◆ any new symptom you haven't discussed with your doctor
- ◆ dizziness or shortness of breath
- ◆ chest pain or the feeling that your heart is skipping, racing, or fluttering
- ◆ blood clots
- ◆ an infection or fever
- ◆ unplanned weight loss
- ◆ foot or ankle sores that won't heal
- ◆ joint swelling
- ◆ a bleeding or detached retina, eye surgery, or laser treatment
- ◆ a hernia
- ◆ had hip surgery

Safety Tips

Here are some things you can do to make sure you are exercising safely:

- ◆ Start slowly, especially if you haven't been active for a long time. Little by little build up your activities and how hard you work at them.
- ◆ Don't hold your breath during strength exercises. That could cause changes in your blood pressure. It may seem strange at first, but the rule is to breathe out as you lift something; breathe in as you relax.
- ◆ Use safety equipment. For example, wear a helmet for bike riding or the right shoes for walking or jogging.
- ◆ Unless your doctor has asked you to limit fluids, be sure to drink plenty when you are doing activities. Many older adults don't feel thirsty even if their body needs fluids.
- ◆ Always bend forward from the hips, not the waist. If you keep your back

straight, you're probably bending the right way. If your back "humps," that's probably wrong.

- ◆ Warm up your muscles before you stretch. Try walking and light arm pumping first.

Exercise should not hurt or make you feel really tired. You might feel some soreness, a little discomfort, or a bit weary, but you should not feel pain. In fact, in many ways, being active will probably make you feel better.

How to Find Out More

Local fitness centers or hospitals might be able to help you find a physical activity program that works for you. You also can check with nearby religious groups, senior and civic centers, parks, recreation associations, YMCAs, YWCAs, or even area shopping malls for exercise, wellness, or walking programs.

Looking for a safe exercise program? *Exercise: A Guide from the National Institute on Aging* has strength, balance, and stretching exercises you can do at home. You can order the free *Guide* in English from the NIA Information Center. A Spanish version is available online at www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation. NIA also has a 48-minute exercise video/DVD for \$7.

Many groups have information about physical activity and exercise for older adults. The following list of Federal and non-Federal resources will help you get started:

American College of Sports Medicine

P.O. Box 1440
Indianapolis, IN 46206-1440
317-637-9200
www.acsm.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333
800-311-3435
www.cdc.gov
www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/growing_stronger/

MedlinePlus

“Exercise for Seniors”
“Exercise and Physical Fitness”
www.medlineplus.gov

President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

Room 738-H
Department W
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201-0004
202-690-9000
www.fitness.gov

Small Steps

www.smallstep.gov

For more information on health and aging, contact:

ational Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
800-222-2225 (toll-free)
800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)
www.nia.nih.gov

To order publications (in English or Spanish) or sign up for regular email alerts, go to www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation.

Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults, including information about exercise and physical activity. There are also special features that make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.



National Institute on Aging

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