

Exercise for Older Adults

Why is exercise important?

Older adults who exercise regularly have more strength, better balance, and better coordination than older adults not getting regular exercise. Regular exercise makes it easier to do daily chores and to not become dependent on others. Fitness is having the health, strength, endurance, and range of body movements that you need to do physical work without becoming exhausted. If you are fit:

- You can perform better and with less effort in recreational activities and so you are more likely to enjoy them.
- It is easier to tolerate minor aches and pains.
- You are less likely to get depressed. Some studies have shown that for some people, starting exercise can be as effective as anti-depressant medicines.
- You are less likely to develop heart disease or have a stroke. This is important because heart disease and stroke are leading causes of death and disability in older people.

If you are a smoker, some studies say it may be easier to quit if you are exercising. Regular moderate physical activity has many other benefits:

- It strengthens muscles.
- It helps control blood pressure, body weight, and cholesterol levels.
- It helps prevent osteoporosis (bone thinning).
- It probably helps you think better and avoid or delay thinking problems.
- It can help you feel better and enjoy life more.

Falls are especially a problem if you are older and have thin bones. If you fall, you may break a hip. Regular exercise helps to increase muscle strength and balance and makes it easier to move. All of this helps to prevent falls.

How much exercise do I need?

Regular, moderate exercise is much more important for your health than strenuous exercise. In fact, exercise that is too strenuous can strain weak muscles and joints and cause problems. Start exercising slowly, especially if you have not exercised in some time. A good exercise goal is at least 2 hours and 30 minutes (150 minutes) a week of moderate exercise. Moderate exercise means you're working hard enough to raise your heart rate and break a sweat. One way to tell is that you'll be able to talk but not sing. Examples of moderate exercise are walking fast, doing water aerobics, or playing doubles tennis. Try to exercise for at least 10 minutes at a time and spread your total workout time over the week. That means you might do 30-minute workouts, 5 times a week. Also do some form of strength training using gym equipment or your own body weight 2 or more days a week. The exercises should work all major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms). Strength training will make your muscles stronger and able to work longer without getting tired. No matter how much or how little exercise you do, increasing it generally has good health benefits. If you do almost no exercise, adding even a little bit of exercise usually is very helpful. Research shows:

- You will start having health benefits when you get to 30 minutes a day of moderate exercise at least 4 days a week (such as lower blood pressure).
- Long-term fitness starts to improve once you are exercising 30 to 60 minutes a day, 6 to 7 days a

week.

- Getting more exercise helps your blood lipid and blood sugar levels. If you already do a lot of exercise, adding a little more still can have health benefits.

So, if you are doing nothing, figure out how to get started. If you are doing a little exercise, try to do a little more. Add another day, or add another 10-minute exercise session. If you are doing moderate amounts of exercise, you may want to think about adding more to your routines. Always check with your provider before trying major increases in your exercise.

How can I get started?

The first thing you should do is check with your healthcare provider. Your provider may suggest a type and amount of exercise that would be best for you. Choose exercise that doesn't stress your joints and that you can do every day, wherever you happen to be. Pick activities that you enjoy. You will be more likely to stick with them. Aerobic exercise is good for your heart, lungs, and overall health. Walking, swimming, biking, and low-impact dancing are all good aerobic exercises. For strength, try weight training. For older adults, there is less chance of injury if you use weight machines instead of free weights. Activities like yoga and tai chi help improve flexibility. Probably the easiest and most convenient form of exercise for older people is walking. Start by walking at least a mile a day and gradually increase to whatever is comfortable and manageable and makes you feel good. Many shopping malls around the country offer senior walking programs in the mornings before the stores open, so you can walk year-round without worrying about the weather. Mall walks are a great way to start the day and a good way to get out and meet people. Other forms of exercise that are popular among older people are swimming, dancing, group calisthenics, and biking. Many places besides health clubs have exercise programs for seniors. These include senior centers, YMCAs, YWCA, community centers, recreation centers, community colleges, and some retirement centers. Call your local senior center to find out what exercise programs are available in your neighborhood. The choice of exercise is up to you. Do something that doesn't exhaust you or strain your muscles or joints. Also, choose exercise that you can do regularly. It is better to walk to the end of the street and back every day than to get no exercise. If you cannot walk well, you can learn to do chair aerobics exercises. Classes to learn these special exercises are given at many senior centers, or you can borrow or buy videos or DVDs that show how to do the exercises. Once you begin to look for exercise opportunities, you may be surprised at the variety of activities available to you.

Is there a special walking technique?

When you walk, hold yourself straight, your head up and your stomach flat. Point your toes straight ahead, move forward from the ball of your foot and land on your heel. Walk at a steady pace and swing your arms. You don't need special shoes for walking, but you should wear sturdy, well-fitting shoes with good arch support. Your shoes should be made of material that lets your feet breathe, like leather or nylon. Always wear socks with your shoes. If you walk a lot, the soles of your shoes will wear out within a year. Be kind to your knees and treat yourself to new shoes every year (more often if you walk and jog a lot).

What if I feel unwell while I'm exercising?

Don't keep exercising if you feel breathless, dizzy, sweaty, or sick to your stomach. If you feel pain or discomfort in your chest, arms, neck, jaw, or legs, stop and rest. Sit down if you need to and ask a companion or a passer-by for help. Have your healthcare provider check you over. If you think you are in real trouble, call for help and have someone call 911.

How do I stay safe while exercising?

The benefits of exercise are much greater than the risks. However, you can improve the safety of your exercise by following a few common-sense rules.

- Exercise in safe places. Avoid automobile traffic.
- Start your exercise with a warm-up for 5 minutes. For example, start walking at half-speed, concentrating on good posture. Then speed up for the main part of your exercise time. Then add a “cool down” period by slowing your exercise for about the last 5 minutes to let your heart and breathing to go back to normal levels. Then stretch the muscles used during your exercise. Stretching can help your muscles feel less stiff.
- Studies have not proven that muscle stretching truly prevents injuries. Still, it feels good and gets you to pay attention to major muscle groups and how they work for you. Try not to over stretch, and don’t bounce in a stretch.
- Avoid exercise in very cold or very hot weather. If you are going to go out when it’s very hot or cold, go with a buddy and a cell phone. Be sure you have the phone number for someone who could help if you got into trouble.

What else should I do to get and stay fit?

- Pay attention to your general health. Be sure to have regular health checkups. If your healthcare provider prescribes medicine, take it as directed.
- If you smoke, quit. Smoking affects your heart, your blood vessels, and your lungs. Remember that exercising may make it easier to quit.
- If you are overweight, your healthcare provider will probably suggest that you lose weight. Being overweight affects your heart, your blood pressure, and your joints. Eat a balanced diet, with plenty of grains, vegetables, and fruit. Cut down on fatty foods. Exercise is as important as the number of calories in your diet when it comes to weight control. Exercise strengthens muscles, and stronger muscles burn more calories.

All these aspects of health and fitness work together for your benefit. There is no reason not to stay as fit as possible as you get older. The result is well worth the effort. @ Published by RelayHealth.

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