

AgePage

Exercise: Getting Fit For Life

"I don't have time."

"I'm too old—I might hurt myself."

"I'd be too embarrassed at a gym with all those fit young people around."

Sound familiar?

Maybe one of these is the reason you aren't physically active or exercising. But, in fact, scientists now know that it's usually more dangerous to not exercise, no matter how old you are. And you don't need to buy fancy clothes or belong to a gym to become more active.

Most older people don't get enough physical activity. Here are some reasons why they should:

- ◆ Lack of physical activity and not eating the right foods, taken together, are the second greatest underlying cause of death in

the United States. (Smoking is the #1 cause.)

- ◆ Exercise can help older people feel better and enjoy life more. No one is too old or too out of shape to be more active.
- ◆ Regular exercise can prevent or delay some diseases like cancer, heart disease, or diabetes. It can also perk up your mood and help depression, too.
- ◆ Being active can help older people to stay independent and able to keep doing things like getting around or dressing themselves.

So, make physical activity a part of your everyday life. Find things you enjoy. Go for brisk walks. Ride a bike. Dance. Work around the house and in the yard. Take care of your garden. Climb stairs. Rake leaves. Do a mix of things that keep you moving and active.

Four Types of Exercise

There are four types of exercises you need to do to have the right mixture of physical activities.

One—be sure to get at least 30 minutes of activity that makes you breathe harder on most or all days of the week. That's called "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 of endurance activity at a time is fine. Just make sure those 10-minute sessions add up to a total of 30 minutes most days.

How hard do you need to push yourself? One doctor describes the right level of effort this way: If you can talk without any trouble at all, you’re not working hard enough. If you can’t talk at all, it’s too hard.

Two—keep using your muscles. When muscles aren’t used, they waste away at any age.

How important is it to have “enough” muscle? Very! When you have enough muscle, you can get up from a chair by yourself. When you don’t—you have to wait for someone to help you. When you have enough muscle, you can walk through the park with your grandchildren. When you don’t—you have to stay home. That’s true for younger adults as well as for people age 90 and older.

Keeping your muscles in shape can help prevent another serious problem in older people—falls that cause problems like broken hips. When the leg and hip muscles that support you are strong, you’re less likely to fall. Even if you do fall, you will be more likely


to be able to get up on your own. And using your muscles may make your bones stronger, too.

Three—do things to help your balance. For example, stand on one foot, then the other. If you can, don’t hold on to anything for support. Stand up from sitting in 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.

Four—stretch. Stretching can help keep you flexible. You will be able to move more freely. Stretch when your muscles are warmed up. Never stretch so far that it hurts.

Who Should Exercise?

Almost anyone, at any age, can improve his or her health by doing some type of activity. But, check with your doctor first if you plan to do strenuous activity (the kind that makes you breathe hard and sweat) and you are a man over 40 or a woman over 50. Your doctor might be able to give you a go-ahead over the phone, or he or she might ask you to come in for a visit.



You can still exercise even if you have a long-term condition like heart disease or diabetes. In fact, physical activity may help your illness, but only if it's done during times when your condition is under control. During flare-ups, exercise could be harmful. If you have any of the following problems, it's important to check with your doctor before starting an exercise program:

- ◆ a chronic disease, or a high risk of getting one—for example, if you smoke, if you are obese, or if you have a family history of a long-term disease
- ◆ any new symptom you haven't talked about with your doctor
- ◆ chest pain
- ◆ shortness of breath
- ◆ the feeling that your heart is skipping, racing, or fluttering
- ◆ blood clots
- ◆ infections or fever
- ◆ unplanned weight loss
- ◆ foot or ankle sores that won't heal
- ◆ joint swelling
- ◆ pain or trouble walking after you've fallen
- ◆ a bleeding or detached retina, eye surgery, or laser treatment
- ◆ a hernia
- ◆ hip surgery

Safety Tips

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

- ◆ Start slowly. Little by little build up your activities and how hard you work at them. Doing too much, too soon, can hurt you, especially if you have not been active.
- ◆ Don't hold your breath while straining—when using your muscles, for example. That could cause changes in your blood pressure. It may seem strange at first, but the rule is to breathe out while your muscle is working, breathe in when it relaxes. For example, if you are lifting something, breathe out as you lift; breathe in when you stop.
- ◆ If you are taking any medicines or have any illnesses that change your natural heart rate, don't use your pulse rate as a way of judging how hard you should exercise. One example of this kind of medicine is a type of blood pressure drug known as a beta blocker.
- ◆ Use safety equipment to keep you from getting hurt. That means, for example, 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 that make you sweat. Many older people tend to be low on fluid much of the time, even when not exercising.
- ◆ 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. For example, do a little easy biking, or walking and light arm pumping first.

Exercises 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 physically active will probably make you feel better.

How to Find Out More

Local gyms, universities, or hospitals might be able to help you find a teacher or program that works for you. You can also check with nearby churches or synagogues, 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? The National Institute on Aging (NIA) publishes *Exercise: A Guide from the National Institute on Aging*. This free 80-page booklet has instructions and drawings for many strength, balance, and stretching exercises you can do at home. Will they work? Scientific research supported by the NIA helped

experts develop these exercises so they should help you if you do them as described. You can get the guide in English or Spanish. In addition, the NIA has a 48-minute exercise

video for \$7. You can order the video from the NIA Information Center.

Many organizations have information for older people about physical activity and exercise. The following list will help you get started:

American College of Sports Medicine

P.O. Box 1440

Indianapolis, IN 46206-1440

317-637-9200

www.acsm.org

American Physical Therapy Association

1111 North Fairfax Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-1488

1-800-999-2782

www.apta.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333

1-800-311-3435

www.cdc.gov

Fifty-Plus Lifelong Fitness

P.O. Box 20230

Stanford, CA 94309

650-843-1750

www.50plus.org

MedlinePlus

Search for “Exercise for Seniors”

www.medlineplus.gov

The President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

200 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 738-H, Dept. W

Washington, DC 20201-0004

202-690-9000

<http://fitness.gov>

Small Steps

www.smallsteps.gov

For more information on health and aging, contact:

**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225

TTY: 1-800-222-4225

E-mail: niaic@jbs1.com

To order publications (in English or Spanish) online, visit www.niapublications.org

Please visit **NIHSeniorHealth** (www.nihseniorhealth.gov), a senior-friendly Web site from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This Web site features popular health topics, including exercise, for older adults. It has large type, is simple to use, and has a “talking” feature that reads the text aloud.



National Institute on Aging

U.S. Department of Health and
Human Services
Public Health Service
National Institutes of Health

May 2004

