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Exercise and Physical Activity for Older Adults

Being physically active is one of the most important things you can do each day to maintain and improve your health and keep doing things you enjoy as you age.

Exercise and physical activity are good for just about everyone, including older adults. No matter your health and physical abilities, you can gain a lot by staying active. In fact, studies show that “taking it easy” is risky. Being inactive can make it harder for older adults to do things on their own. Lack of physical activity also can lead to more visits to the doctor, more hospitalizations, and more use of medications for a variety of illnesses.

Benefits of exercise

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 and prevent falls
- Manage and prevent some diseases, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and certain types of cancer
- Reduce feelings of depression and stress, while improving your mood and overall emotional well-being
- Possibly improve or maintain some aspects of cognitive function
- Get better sleep
- Reach or maintain a healthy weight

How to get started

The key to being successful and safe when beginning a physical activity routine is to build slowly from your current fitness level. A steady rate of progress is the best approach.

Find things you like to do, try different kinds of activities that keep you moving, and look for new ways to build physical activity into your daily routine.

If you have specific health conditions or concerns, discuss your exercise and physical activity plan with your health care provider. You can ask:

- What level of exercise would work for me?
- Are there any exercises or activities I should avoid?
- How do health conditions affect my ability to exercise?
- Is my preventive care up to date?

What are the four types of exercise?

Research has shown that it’s important to incorporate all four types of exercise into your routine: endurance, strength, balance, and flexibility. Each type of exercise has different benefits. Doing one kind can improve your ability to do others and incorporating a variety of exercises can help reduce boredom and risk of injury.

- **Endurance**, often referred to as aerobic, activities increase your breathing and heart rate. Aim for at least 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity activities that make you breathe hard, such as brisk walking, dancing, or swimming.
- **Strength** exercises build muscles. Try to do strength exercises for all of your major muscle groups at least 2 days per week, but don’t exercise the same muscle group on any 2 days in a row. Examples of strength exercises include lifting weights, using a resistance band, or lifting your body weight.

- **Balance** exercises help improve balance and prevent falls. You can try activities such as tai chi, getting up from a chair without using your hands or arms, standing on one foot, or walking heel-to-toe.
- **Flexibility** exercises, or stretches, help you to move more freely. Stretch when your muscles are warmed up and consider incorporating yoga into your day.

No matter your age, you can find activities that meet your fitness level and needs.

Exercising safely

Almost anyone, at any age, can do some type of physical activity. You can still exercise even if you have a health condition like heart disease, arthritis, chronic pain, high blood pressure, or diabetes. In fact, physical activity may help. For most older adults, physical activities such as brisk walking, riding a bike, swimming, weightlifting, and gardening are safe, especially if you build up slowly.

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

- Wear appropriate fitness clothes, shoes, and safety equipment for your activity.
- Begin your exercise program slowly with low-intensity exercises.
- Warm up before exercising and cool down afterward.
- Pay attention to your surroundings when exercising.
- Drink water before, during, and after your workout session.
- Breathe out as you exert and breathe in as you relax.
- Bend forward from the hips and not the waist, keeping your back straight.
- Listen to your body and stop if anything is causing you pain.

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. Talk with your health care provider if you have concerns about exercising safely.

Simple ways older adults can stay active

Here are a few ideas to help get you moving:

- Check out exercise classes at your local senior center or fitness center.
- Go for a hike in a park or find local stores or malls large enough for you to walk around.
- Garden and do yard work such as raking, digging, and planting.
- Make exercise a social activity, such as having an “exercise buddy” or joining team sports.
- Try exercises on the National Institute on Aging YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/@nihaging.

For more information about exercise and physical activity

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

800-232-4636

888-232-6348 (TTY)

cdcinfo@cdc.gov

www.cdc.gov

MedlinePlus

National Library of Medicine

www.medlineplus.gov

Move Your Way

Office of Disease Prevention and
Health Promotion

<https://health.gov/moveyourway>

National Institute on Aging

800-222-2225

800-222-4225 (TTY)

niaic@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

Visit www.nia.nih.gov/health to find more health and aging information from NIA and subscribe to email alerts. Visit <https://order.nia.nih.gov> to order free print publications.



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