

Exercise and Fitness as You Age

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Exercise Tips to Get Fit and Stay Fit as You Grow Older



As you grow older, an active lifestyle is more important than ever. Regular exercise can help boost energy, maintain your independence, and manage symptoms of illness or pain. Exercise can even reverse some of the symptoms of aging. And not only is exercise good for your body, it's also good for your mind, mood, and memory. Whether you are generally healthy or are managing an illness, there are plenty of ways to get more active, improve confidence, and boost your fitness.

Exercise is the key to healthy aging

Starting or maintaining a regular exercise routine can be a challenge as you get older. You may feel discouraged by illness, ongoing health problems, or concerns about injuries or falls. Or, if you've never exercised before, you may not know where to begin. Or perhaps you think you're too old or frail, or that exercise is boring or simply not for you.

While these may seem like good reasons to slow down and take it easy as you age, they're actually even better reasons to get moving. Exercise can energize your mood, relieve stress, help you manage symptoms of illness and pain, and improve your overall sense of well-being. In fact, exercise is the key to staying strong, energetic, and healthy as you get older. And it can even be fun, too, especially if you find like-minded people to exercise with.

No matter your age or your current physical condition, you can benefit from exercise. Reaping the rewards of exercise doesn't have to involve strenuous workouts or trips to the gym. It's about adding more movement and activity to your life, even in small ways. Whether you are generally healthy or are managing an illness—even if you're housebound—there are many easy ways to get your body moving and improve your health and outlook.



Five myths about exercise and aging

Myth 1: There's no point to exercising. I'm going to get old anyway.

Fact: Exercise and strength training helps you look and feel younger and stay active longer. Regular physical activity lowers your risk for a variety of conditions, including Alzheimer's and dementia, heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers, high blood pressure, and obesity. Not only can exercise help stem the decline in strength and vitality that comes with age, it even improve it. And the mood benefits of exercise can be just as great as 70 or 80 as they were at 20 or 30.

Myth 2: Older people shouldn't exercise. They should save their strength and rest.

Fact: Research shows that a sedentary lifestyle is unhealthy for adults over 50. Inactivity often causes older adults to lose the ability to do things on their own and can lead to more hospitalizations, doctor visits, and use of medicines for illnesses.

Myth 3: Exercise puts me at risk of falling down.

Fact: Regular exercise, by building strength and stamina, prevents loss of bone mass and improves balance, actually *reducing* your risk of falling.

Myth 4: It's too late. I'm already too old to start exercising.

Fact: You're never too old to start exercising and improve your health! In fact, adults who take up exercise later in life often show greater physical and mental improvements than their younger counterparts. If you've never exercised before, or it's been a while, you won't be encumbered by the same sports injuries that many regular exercisers experience in later life. In other words, there aren't as many miles on your clock so you'll quickly start reaping the rewards. Just begin with gentle activities and build up from there.

Myth 5: I'm disabled. I can't exercise sitting down.

Fact: Chair-bound people face special challenges but can lift light weights, stretch, and do chair aerobics, chair yoga, and chair Tai Chi to increase range of motion, improve muscle tone and flexibility, and promote cardiovascular health. Many swimming pools offer access to wheelchair users and there are adaptive exercise programs for wheelchair sports such as basketball.

The physical and mental benefits of exercise for older adults

As you age, regular exercise is more important than ever to your overall health. In fact, a recent Swedish study found that exercise was the number one contributor to longevity, adding extra years to your life—even if you don't start exercising until your senior years. But it's not just about adding years to your life, it's about adding life to your years. You'll not only look better when you exercise, you'll feel sharper, more energetic, and experience a greater sense of well-being

Physical health benefits of exercise and fitness for older adults

- Exercise helps older adults maintain or lose weight. As metabolism naturally slows with age, maintaining a healthy weight is a challenge. Exercise helps increase metabolism and builds muscle mass, helping to burn more calories. When your body reaches a healthy weight, your overall wellness will improve.
- Exercise reduces the impact of illness and chronic disease. Among the many benefits of exercise for adults over 50 include improved immune function, better heart health and blood pressure, better bone density, and better digestive functioning. People who exercise also have a lowered risk of several chronic conditions including Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, obesity, heart disease, osteoporosis, and certain cancers.
- Exercise enhances mobility, flexibility, and balance in older adults. Exercise improves your strength, flexibility and posture, which in turn will help with balance, coordination, and reducing the risk of falls. Strength training also helps alleviate the symptoms of chronic conditions such as arthritis.

Mental health benefits of exercise and fitness as you age

- **Exercise improves your sleep.** Poor sleep is not an inevitable consequence of aging and quality sleep is important for your overall health. Exercise often improves sleep, helping you fall asleep more quickly and sleep more deeply.
- **Exercise boosts mood and self-confidence.** Exercise is a huge stress reliever and the endorphins produced can actually help reduce feelings of sadness, depression, or anxiety. Being active and feeling strong naturally helps you feel more self-confident and sure of yourself.
- **Exercise is amazingly good for the brain.** Activities like Sudoku or crossword puzzles can help keep your brain active, but little comes close to the beneficial effects of exercise on the brain. Exercise benefits brain functions as diverse as multitasking and creativity and can help prevent memory loss, cognitive decline, and dementia. Exercise may even help slow the progression of brain disorders such as Alzheimer's disease

Exercise and fitness as you age: Tips for getting started safely

Committing to a routine of physical activity is one of the healthiest decisions you can make. Before you get moving, though, consider how best to be safe.

- **Get medical clearance** from your doctor before starting an exercise program, especially if you have a preexisting condition. Ask if there are any activities you should avoid.
- **Consider health concerns.** Keep in mind how your ongoing health problems affect your workouts. For example, diabetics may need to adjust the timing of medication and meal plans when setting an exercise schedule. Above all, if something feels wrong, such as sharp pain or unusual shortness of breath, simply stop. You may need to scale back or try another activity.
- **Start slow.** If you haven't been active in a while, it can be harmful to immediately go "all out." Instead, build up your exercise program little by little. Try spacing workouts in ten-minute increments twice a day. Or try just one class each week. Prevent injury and discomfort by warming up, cooling down, and keeping water handy.
- **Commit to an exercise schedule** for at least 3 or 4 weeks so that it becomes habit, and force yourself to stick with it. That will be much easier if you find activities you enjoy.
- **Stay motivated** by focusing on short-term goals, such as improving your mood and energy levels and reducing stress, rather than goals such as weight loss, which can take longer to achieve.
- **Recognize problems.** Exercise should never hurt or make you feel lousy. Stop exercising immediately and call your doctor if you feel dizzy or short of breath, develop chest pain or

pressure, break out in a cold sweat, or experience pain. Also stop if a joint is red, swollen, or tender to touch. Listen to your body. If you tend to experience pain or discomfort after exercising for a while, try exercising for less time but more frequently throughout the day.

- **Experiment with mindfulness.** Instead of zoning out when you exercise, try to pay attention to your body. By really focusing on how your body feels as you exercise—the rhythm of your breathing, the way your feet strike the ground, your muscles flexing as you move, for example—you'll improve your physical condition faster and better help to relieve stress and anxiety.

Exercise and fitness as you age: Tips for building a balanced exercise plan

Staying active is not a science. Just remember that mixing different types of exercise helps both to keep your workouts interesting and improve your overall health. The key is to find activities that you enjoy. Here is an overview of the four building blocks of fitness as you age and how they can help your body.

The 1st building block of fitness as you age: Cardio endurance exercise

- **What is it:** Uses large muscle groups in rhythmic motions over a period of time. Cardio workouts get your heart pumping and you may even feel a little short of breath. Cardio includes walking, stair climbing, swimming, hiking, cycling, rowing, tennis, and dancing.
- **Why it's good for you:** Helps lessen fatigue and shortness of breath. Promotes independence by improving endurance for daily activities such as walking, house cleaning, and errands.

The 2nd building block of fitness as you age: Strength and power training

- **What is it:** Strength training builds up muscle with repetitive motion using weight or external resistance from body weight, machines, free weights, or elastic bands. Power training is often strength training done at a faster speed to increase power and reaction times.
- **Why it's good for you:** Strength training helps prevent loss of bone mass, builds muscle, and improves balance—both important in staying active and avoiding falls. Power training can improve your speed while crossing the street, for example, or prevent falls by enabling you to react quickly if you start to trip or lose balance. Building strength and power will help you stay independent and make day-to-day activities easier such as opening a jar, getting in and out of a car, and lifting objects.

The 3rd building block of fitness as you age: Flexibility

- **What is it:** Challenges the ability of your body's joints to move freely through a full range of motion. This can be done through stationary stretches and stretches that involve movement to keep your muscles and joints supple so they are less prone to injury. Yoga is an excellent means of improving flexibility.
- **Why it's good for you:** Helps your body stay limber and increases your range of movement for ordinary physical activities such as looking behind while driving, tying your shoes, shampooing your hair, and playing with your grandchildren.

The 4th building block of fitness as you age: Balance

- **What is it:** Maintains standing and stability, whether you're stationary or moving around. Try yoga, Tai Chi, and posture exercises to gain confidence with balance.
- **Why it's good for you:** Improves balance, posture, and quality of your walking. Also reduces risk of falling and fear of falls.

Types of activities beneficial to older adults:

- **Walking.** Walking is a perfect way to start exercising. It requires no special equipment, aside from a pair of comfortable walking shoes, and can be done anywhere.
- **Senior sports or fitness classes.** Keeps you motivated while also providing a source of fun, stress relief, and a place to meet friends.
- **Water aerobics and water sports.** Working out in water is wonderful for seniors because water reduces stress and strain on the body's joints.
- **Yoga.** Combines a series of poses with breathing. Moving through the poses works on strength, flexibility and balance. Yoga can be adapted to any level.
- **Tai Chi and Qi Gong.** Martial arts-inspired systems of movement that increase balance and strength. Classes for seniors are often available at your local YMCA or community center.

Exercise and fitness as you age: Tips for frail or chair-bound adults

Even if you are frail or chair-bound, you can still experience the physical and mental benefits of exercise. Chair-bound adults can improve fitness with strength training, flexibility, and cardio activities. If being chair-bound has prevented you from trying exercise in the past, take heart knowing that when you become more physically active, the results will amaze you. Like any exercise program, a chair-bound fitness routine takes a little creativity and personalization to keep it fun.

Chair-bound exercise and fitness

- **Strength:** Use free weights (“dumbbells”) to do repetitive sets of lifting. Don’t have weights? Use anything that is weighted and fits in your hand, like soup cans.
- **Resistance:** Resistance bands are like giant rubber bands designed to give your muscles a good workout when stretched and pulled. Resistance bands can be attached to furniture, a doorknob, or even your chair. Use these for pull-downs, shoulder rotations, and arm and leg-extensions.
- **Flexibility:** By practicing mindful breathing and slowly stretching, bending, and twisting, you can limber up and improve your range of motion. Some of these exercises can also be done lying down. Ask your doctor, search online, or see Resources section below for chair-yoga or chair Tai Chi possibilities.
- **Endurance:** Check out pool-therapy programs designed for wheelchair-bound seniors. Also, wheelchair-training machines make arm-bicycling and rowing possible. If you lack access to special machines or pools, repetitive movements (like rapid leg lifts or sitting pushups) work just as well to raise your heart rate.

Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about chair-bound exercise programs or see Chair Exercises & Limited Mobility Fitness.

Exercise and fitness as you age: Tips for getting more active—and liking it

If you dread working out, it's time for a mental makeover. Getting active may feel awkward or unnatural at first, but the longer you stick with a regular exercise routine, the more you'll come to enjoy it. Once you start reaping the rewards and noticing the changes to the way you feel, you'll find it easier to stay motivated. In time, you'll even look forward to your workouts.

Until that point, don't view exercise as a bothersome task to check off your "to do" list. Look at it as part of your healthy lifestyle, like eating and sleeping well. There are plenty of ways for older adults to make exercise a pleasurable part of everyday life. Start small—even exercising for five or ten minutes a day is better than nothing. You can gradually build up once it's become habit. Here are some other ways to make exercise part of your lifestyle:

Choose activities and exercises you enjoy

Think about activities that you enjoy and how you can incorporate them into an exercise routine.

- Listen to music while lifting weights.
- Window shop while walking laps at the mall.
- Get competitive while playing tennis.
- Take photographs on a nature hike.
- Meet new people at a yoga class or fitness center.
- Watch a favorite movie or TV show while on the treadmill.
- Instead of chatting with a friend over coffee, chat while walking, stretching, or strength training.
- Walk the golf course instead of using a cart.
- Walk or play fetch with a dog—it can be as good for you as it is for the animal. If you don't own a dog, offer to take a neighbor's dog for a walk or volunteer at a pet shelter.
- Go for a run, walk, or cycle when you're feeling stressed—see how much better you feel afterwards.
- Find an exercise buddy, someone whose company you really enjoy, and try activities you've never tried before—you may find something you love. At worst, you would have spent time with a good friend.

Find easy ways to add more physical activity to your day

Being active doesn't have to be limited to your workout times. There are plenty of ways to become more active as you go about your day.

- **Active on the go:** Always choose stairs over the elevator, park at the far end of the parking lot when arriving at appointments and meetings, walk down every aisle of the grocery store while shopping, practice balancing skills while standing in line, do neck rolls while waiting at a stoplight.
- **Active at home:** Do a set of wall pushups while waiting for water to boil, vigorously vacuum (and cut time off your housework), tend to the garden, sweep the sidewalk, rake leaves instead of using a leaf blower, lift weights while watching the news, try toe-raises while talking on the phone, do knee bends after sitting for a long period of time.

Focus on the benefits in your daily life

The most rewarding part of beginning a fitness routine is noticing the difference it makes in the rest of your life. Even if you begin exercising with a few simple stretches while seated or a short walk around the block, you'll notice an improvement in how you feel as you go about your day.

- **House cleaning, gardening, shopping, and errands.** Want to feel less winded while cleaning or rushing to and from appointments? Doing just 15 to 20 minutes of heart-healthy cardio each day, such as walking, biking, swimming, or water aerobics will help give you the stamina you need.
- **Lifting grandchildren, carrying groceries, household chores.** Building muscle mass a few times each week through weight lifting, resistance exercises, and weight machines will help give you more strength.
- **Crossing the street before the lights change, catching yourself before you fall.** Power exercises such as tricep dips, chair stands, or other strength exercises performed quickly, can improve strength, speed, and reaction times.
- **Tying shoes, looking behind you while driving, navigating steps.** Incorporating basic stretching—even while seated—into your fitness routine will make the most ordinary movements easier. Try yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi, or Qi Gong to limber up.

Exercise doesn't have to break the bank

An exercise plan does not depend on costly gym memberships and fancy exercise equipment. Like the best things in life, staying fit can be completely free. Work out the wallet-friendly way:

- Do neck rolls and light stretching while watching TV
- No weights? Use food cans or water bottles or inexpensive resistance bands
- Rent exercise videos from the library
- Mow the lawn, clear snow, weed
- Climb stairs
- Enjoy a walk in a new park or neighborhood
- Play with your grandkids or a pet

Exercise and fitness as you age: Tips for staying active for life

The more you exercise, the more you will reap the benefits, so it's important to stay motivated when life's challenges get in the way.

- **Keep a log.** Writing down your activities in an exercise journal not only holds you accountable, but also is a reminder of your accomplishments.
- **Stay inspired.** Reading health magazines or watching sports shows can help remind you how great it feels to take care of your body.
- **Get support.** It's easier to keep going with support. Consider taking a class or exercising with your spouse or a buddy.
- **Exercise safely.** Nothing derails an exercise plan like an injury. Use common sense and don't exercise if you are ill. Wear brightly colored clothing to be visible on the roads. When the weather brings slippery conditions, walk at a mall indoors to prevent falling.
- **Don't feel guilty** if you have to skip a day or don't exercise for as long as normal on another day. Some days you may walk for 30 minutes, another day it may only be for 10. Just remember: something is always better than nothing.

How To Stay Fit When Your Routine Changes

You're on vacation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Many hotels now have fitness centers. Check out the facilities where you'll be staying, and bring along your exercise clothing or equipment (resistance band, bathing suit, or walking shoes).• Get out and see the sights on foot rather than just by tour bus.
Caring for an ill spouse is taking up much of your time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work out to an exercise video when your spouse is napping.• Ask a family member or friend to come over so you can go for a walk.
Your usual exercise buddy moves away	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask another friend to go with you on your daily walk.• Ask other older adults in your area where they go for walks or what physical activity resources are available nearby.• Join an exercise class at your local community center or senior center. This is a great way to meet other active people.
You move to a new community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Check out the fitness centers, parks, community websites, and recreation associations in your new neighborhood.• Look for activities that match your interests and abilities.• Get involved!
The flu keeps you out of action for a few weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wait until you feel better and then start your activity again.• Gradually build back up to your previous level of activity
You are recovering from hip or back surgery	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talk with your doctor about specific exercises and activities you can do safely when you're feeling better.• Start slowly and gradually build up your activities as you become stronger.• The best thing about working out is that it gives you the energy to get more out of life. When it becomes habit, you'll never want to give it up.

Adapted from the National Institutes on Aging

More help for exercise and fitness as you age

- **Exercise and Fitness Help Center:** Learn how to incorporate more movement into your life and enjoy yourself while you're at it.
- **Easy Ways to Start Exercising:** Making Exercise an Enjoyable Part of Your Everyday Life
- **Chair Exercises and Limited Mobility Fitness:** Exercise Tips for People with Injuries, Illness, or Disabilities
- **How to Practice Yoga and Tai Chi:** Tips on Using Yoga and Tai Chi to Relieve Stress
- **What's the Best Exercise Plan for Me?** Take the "Work" Out of Workouts with a Fitness Plan that "Fits" You
- **How to Create an Effective Fitness Routine:** Tips to Help you Stay Fit and Juice Up a Workout

Healthy lifestyles for older adults

- **Staying Healthy As You Age:** How to Feel Young and Live Life to the Fullest
- **Eating Well as You Age:** Nutrition and Diet Tips for Healthy Eating as You Age
- **The Health Benefits of Dogs (and Cats):** How Caring for Pets can Help You Deal with Depression, Anxiety, and Stress
- **Healthy Weight Loss and Dieting Tips:** How to Lose Weight and Keep It Off
- **The Benefits of Play for Adults:** How Play Can Improve Your Health, Work, and Family Relationships

Resources and references

General information about exercise for older adults

- Keep Active for a Longer, Healthier Life – Discusses value of exercise and provides tips to help you get started. (AARP)

Fitness plans and exercise instruction for older adults

- NIH Senior Health: Exercise for Older Adults – Covers the benefits of exercise for seniors, safe exercises to try, an FAQ, and charts to track your progress. (National Institute of Health)
- NIH Exercise Guide – Sample exercises and charts. (National Institute of Health)
- The Water Well – Discusses the benefits of water exercise for people with medical conditions like osteoporosis, diabetes, and back problems. (Aquatic Exercise Association)

Exercises in a chair or wheelchair

- Wheelchair Yoga – Sample poses that can be performed in a wheelchair. (May All Be Happy)
- Locate Chair Yoga Teachers – Find chair yoga classes and instructors in the US., Canada, England, Ireland, and several other countries. (Get Fit Where You Sit)
- Chair Tai Chi – Video demonstrating Tai Chi for chair-bound individuals (YouTube)