

AgePage

Exercise and Physical Activity: Getting Fit for Life

“My wife, Miki, 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, stretch, and do a few balance exercises. Being active helps us feel better—and it’s good for our hearts!”

Bob and Miki know 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 and prevent falls

- Prevent or delay some diseases like heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and certain types of cancer
- Perk up your mood and reduce feelings of depression
- Sleep better at night
- Reduce levels of stress and anxiety
- Reach or maintain a healthy weight

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. Try to build up to at least 30 minutes of activity that makes you breathe hard on most or all days of the week. Every day is best. 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. Try to be active throughout your day to reach this goal, and avoid sitting for long periods of time.

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, lift your grandchildren, and walk through the park.

Keeping your muscles strong can help with your balance and prevent falls and fall-related injuries. 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 at first you need support, hold on to something sturdy. Work your way up to doing the exercises without support. Get up from a chair without using your hands or arms. Try the heel-to-toe walk. As you walk, put the heel of one foot just in front of the toes of your other foot. Your heel and toes should touch or almost touch.

4. Stretching can improve your **flexibility**. Moving more freely will make it easier for you to reach down to tie your shoes or look over your shoulder when you back your car out of the 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 health condition like heart disease, arthritis, chronic pain, 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. If you have any symptoms that haven't been diagnosed, or if you have a chronic condition that is not being monitored by a doctor, check with your doctor before beginning an exercise routine. You can always talk to your doctor if it makes you more comfortable when starting to be active.

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 you should breathe out as you lift something and breathe in as you relax.
- Use safety equipment. For example, wear a helmet for bike riding and the right shoes for walking or jogging.
- Unless your doctor has asked you to limit fluids, be sure to drink plenty of fluids when you are doing activities, even if you don't feel thirsty.
- Always bend forward from the hips, not the waist. If you keep your back straight, you're probably bending the right way.
- 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.

For More Information About Exercise and Physical Activity

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, JCCs, or even area shopping malls for exercise, wellness, or walking programs.

Looking for more information on how to begin an exercise plan and keep going? Visit **Go4Life**[®] at <https://go4life.nia.nih.gov>. This exercise and physical activity website from the National Institute on Aging has exercise examples, tracking worksheets, workout videos, and tips to help you stay motivated.

The following resources have information about physical activity and exercise for older adults to help you get started.

American College of Sports Medicine

1-317-637-9200
publicinfo@acsm.org
www.acsm.org

American Council on Exercise

1-888-825-3636 (toll-free)
receptionist@acefitness.org
www.acefitness.org

American Physical Therapy Association

1-800-999-2782 (toll-free)
consumer@apta.org
www.moveforwardpt.com

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1-800-232-4636 (toll-free)
1-888-232-6348 (TTY/toll-free)
cdcinfo@cdc.gov
www.cdc.gov

MedlinePlus

National Library of Medicine
www.medlineplus.gov
https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseandphysicalfitness.html
https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseforolderadults.html

National Council on Aging

1-571-527-3900
www.benefitscheckup.org

President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition

1-240-276-9567
fitness@hhs.gov
www.fitness.gov

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)
1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)
niaic@nia.nih.gov
www.nia.nih.gov
https://go4life.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.



National Institute on Aging

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