

Let's Live a Little: Physical Activity for Fun and Fitness

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Dispelling the Myth

Many people grow up believing it is normal for older people to become weak, to slow down, and to stop doing most of the things they once did. But Gayle Doll, assistant professor and Director of the Center on Aging at Kansas State University, says that's not necessarily true, although many people have taken this idea much too far. People are not weak just because they are old; people are often weak because they are inactive. A good number of older adults have believed a myth and lost much of their functional ability in the process.

The good news: It is not so difficult for most people to maintain or recover their functional ability and live an active, independent lifestyle. People can significantly improve their quality of life with a few minutes of physical activity each day. Older adults can feel good and do the things they want to do with less pain and more energy. And it can be fun!

Why Is Physical Activity Important?

Because it . . .

- strengthens the cardiovascular system (heart, lungs and blood vessels);
- promotes muscle strength;
- increases endurance and stamina;
- increases flexibility;
- helps reduce fatigue;
- helps produce good-quality sleep;



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- helps balance and coordination;
- reduces anxiety and depression;
- helps regain physical function;
- helps prevent constipation;
- improves ability to participate in family and social activities;
- helps prevent bone loss, resulting in fewer fractures;
- increases life expectancy; and
- helps reduce weight or helps maintain a healthy weight (reduces stress on joints).

Regular physical activity is one of the most important things you can do for your health, no matter your age, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As you age, muscle strength declines. You can lose up to one-half of your strength and muscle mass between the ages of 25 and 80 if you don't do something to prevent the loss. Regular physical activity not only prevents muscle loss, it also can increase muscle strength and muscle mass; increase bone density; and reduce the risk for chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, osteoporosis, and arthritis. Physical activity helps your muscles grow stronger so you can keep doing your day-to-day activities without becoming dependent on others.

Long periods of inactivity can lead to weakness, stiffness, fatigue, and a variety of ailments, for anyone. **Although there are no cures for many of the illnesses in the world, the cure for inactivity is known — exercise!**

Where Do I Begin?

Research shows it doesn't take hours of painful, sweat-soaked exercise to achieve most of the health benefits of physical activity. Short periods of gentle physical activity can significantly improve health and fitness, reduce disease risks, and boost your mood. Even a few minutes a day can work wonders.

A complete program of physical activity should include three types of activities.

Flexibility activities stretch or loosen muscles and joints and help with balance and coordination. Do these slowly, holding each stretch for a few seconds.

Stretch major muscle groups three or more times per week. Don't bounce; stretch slowly until you feel comfortable tension, not pain. Hold the stretch for 10 to 30 seconds and breathe freely throughout the stretch. (Do not hold your breath.)

Strengthening activities make your muscles stronger by working them harder and are usually done against resistance. They also help balance and coordination.

Recommendations include 8 to 10 strengthening exercises two to three days a week. It's best not to do strengthening exercises every day — a day between gives muscles and joints time to adapt and strengthen. Strength training has proven beneficial in older adults — even those in their 90s.

Endurance or aerobic activities are also called cardiovascular exercises. They work most of the body and include walking, biking, dancing, and swimming.

Moderate aerobic activities for 20 to 30 minutes, three to five days a week are recommended. To be most effective, these activities should be done for a total of 150 minutes per week. When exercising at a moderate level, you should be able to talk comfortably while doing the activity.

If you have **not** been exercising before, it is best to consult with your physician before beginning, especially if you have a chronic disease. But for most people, it is more dangerous to be physically inactive than it is to begin an exercise program.

Listen to your body and keep track of how you are feeling to know if you've done too much. If you get out of breath or are so tired that you have to stop before completing 10 minutes of an activity, then you



are working too hard. Next time slow down, do less, or work at a less intense level.

Almost everyone can gain the health benefits of physical activity — age, ethnicity, shape, or size do not matter. Even if you are unable to walk, there are activities you can do to benefit your health right in your own chair.

When planning your program, start where you are now and gradually increase your activity toward the ultimate goals suggested.

Planning Your Physical Activity Program

- **The best way to enjoy and stick with your exercise program is to suit yourself.** Choose what you like to do, find a place where you feel comfortable, and select an exercise time that fits your schedule. Exercising with music may also add to your enjoyment.
- **Pick two or three activities you think you would enjoy** and that wouldn't put undue stress on your body. Change your activities occasionally so you don't get in a rut. **See the chart on the next page for some ideas.**
- **Having fun** is a benefit of exercise that often goes unmentioned. Learn to think of exercise as recreation rather than a chore.
- **Make an exercise diary** or calendar to help track your progress (walking farther, feeling better, sleeping better, more energy, etc.).
- **Set specific goals.** Not "I want to walk more," but "I plan to walk for 30 minutes after breakfast every other day."
- **Reward yourself for even small successes.** If you miss a day, don't stress. Just vow to try again tomorrow.
- **Include warm-ups.** If you are going to exercise at an intensity that causes you to breathe harder or your heart to beat faster, it is important to warm up first. A warm-up means that you do at least 5



minutes of a low-intensity activity to allow your heart, lungs, and circulation to gradually increase their work. If you are going for a brisk walk, warm up with 5 minutes of slow walking first. Warming up reduces the risk of injuries, soreness, and irregular heartbeat.

- **Cool-downs are just as important.** A cool-down period is important if you have exercised at an intensity that required you to breathe harder, your heart to beat faster, you felt warmer, or you perspired. Repeating the 5-minute warm-up activity or taking a slow walk helps your muscles to gradually relax and your heart and breathing to slow down. Gentle stretching and flexibility exercises during the cool-down can be effective for increasing motion because your muscles and joints are warm and more easily stretched. Stretching gently now also helps reduce the muscle soreness and stiffness that may follow vigorous exercise.

A Healthy Choice

When it comes to your personal fitness program, making a plan, sticking with it, and doing it **your** way makes you a definite winner! Remember, advancing age is no excuse. **You can improve your functional ability and your health.**

Choose to put physical activity into your day — every day — for fun and fitness!

What Physical Activities Should I Do?

For best health, participate in activities from each of these three groups.

Flexibility (Range of Motion)	Resistance/Endurance (Muscle Strength)	Cardiovascular (Healthy Heart)
Moves joints through their full range of motion.	Works the muscles against a force.	Increases the heart rate for a longer period of time.
Advantages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases ease of movement Improves ability of the elderly to maintain independence 	Advantages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes muscles stronger Tones the body 	Advantages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improves heart health Burns calories for weight loss or maintenance Reduces risk of chronic disease
Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stretching after doing exercise Classes such as yoga, pilates, martial arts, or tai chi 	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lifting homemade weights (milk jugs filled with water, canned foods) Using exercise bands or tubes Using a medicine ball to build core strength Using body weight (push-ups, chair sits, stomach curls) Lifting free weights (dumbbells) Using weight machines (most often found in a fitness center or gym) Group exercise classes or videos (muscle conditioning) 	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walking Running Bicycling (either stationary or outdoor) Dancing Group exercise (chair aerobics, low impact aerobics) Climbing stairs Vigorous yard work (lawn mowing, raking)
Daily, or at least three days per week	Twice per week, skipping one day between workouts	30 minutes on five or more days per week

Information Sources

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