

Exercise: How to Get Started

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Safety First

Start Out Slowly

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Most older adults, regardless of age or condition, will do just fine increasing their physical activity to a moderate level. However, if you haven't been active for a long time, it's important to start out at a low level of effort and work your way up slowly.

When to Check with Your Doctor

If you are at high risk for any chronic diseases such as heart disease or diabetes, or if you smoke or are obese, you should check first with your doctor before becoming more physically active.

Other reasons to check with your doctor before you exercise include

- any new, undiagnosed symptom
- chest pain
- irregular, rapid, or fluttery heart beat
- severe shortness of breath.

Check with your doctor if you have

- ongoing, significant, and undiagnosed weight loss
- infections, like pneumonia, accompanied by fever which can cause rapid heart beat and dehydration
- an acute blood clot
- a hernia that is causing symptoms such as pain and discomfort.

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- foot or ankle sores that won't heal
- persistent pain or problems walking after a fall -- you might have a fracture and not know it
- eye conditions such as bleeding in the retina or a detached retina. Also consult your doctor after a cataract removal or lens implant, or after laser treatment or other eye surgery.

Check with your doctor if you have

- a weakening in the wall of the heart's major outgoing blood vessel called an abdominal aortic aneurysm
- a narrowing of one of the heart's valves called critical aortic stenosis
- joint swelling.

If You've Had Hip Replacement

If you have had hip repair or replacement,

- check with your doctor before doing lower-body exercises.
- don't cross your legs.
- don't bend your hips farther than a 90-degree angle.
- avoid locking the joints in your legs into a strained position.

Discuss Your Activity Level

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Your activity level is an important topic to discuss with your doctor as part of your ongoing preventive health care. Talk about exercise at least once a year if your health is stable, and more often if your health is getting better or worse over time so that you can adjust your exercise program. Your doctor can help you choose activities that are best for you and reduce any risks.

Tips to Avoid Injury

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When you exercise, it is important to do it safely. Follow these tips to avoid injury.

- When starting an exercise program, begin slowly with low-intensity exercises.
- Wait at least 2 hours after eating a large meal before doing strenuous exercise.
- Wear appropriate shoes for your activity and comfortable, loose-fitting clothing that allows you to move freely but won't catch on other objects.
- Warm up with low-intensity exercises at the beginning of each exercise session.
- Drink water before, during, and after your exercise session.
- When exercising outdoors, pay attention to your surroundings -- consider possible traffic hazards, the weather, uneven walking surfaces, and strangers.

When to Stop Exercising

Stop exercising if you

- have pain or pressure in your chest, neck, shoulder, or arm
- feel dizzy or sick to your stomach
- break out in a cold sweat
- have muscle cramps
- feel severe pain in joints, feet, ankles, or legs.

Frequently Asked Questions

2. How do I identify my starting point?

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To figure out how to start becoming more active, you need to know your starting point and build slowly from there. Knowing your starting point will help you pick activities that are comfortable and realistic for you. Starting out this way also will help you be successful.

To identify your starting point, think about a typical weekday and weekend day. How much time do you spend sitting? How much time are you active? When you're up and moving, what kinds of activities are you doing?

To help you figure out your activity level, try filling in an activity log. For a couple of weekdays and a weekend, keep track of how much time you exercise or are physically active. Write down how much time you spend doing each activity.

Download and print out [this free activity log](#) from Go4Life® , the exercise and physical activity campaign from the National Institute on Aging.

Frequently Asked Questions

3. How do I know what my fitness level is?

To help you figure out your current activity level, try filling in an activity log. For a couple of weekdays and a weekend, keep track of how much time you exercise or are physically active. Write down how much time you spend doing each activity. Here are tests you can use that measure endurance, strength, balance, and flexibility.

- **Endurance.** Pick a fixed course—once around the block or from one end of the mall to the other. Time how long it takes you to walk it.
- **Upper-body Strength.** Count how many arm curls you can do safely in 2 minutes.
- **Lower-body Strength.** Count how many chair stands you can do safely in 2 minutes.
- **Balance.** How long can you safely stand on one foot? (Stand next to something sturdy you can hold on to if you lose your balance.)
- **Flexibility.** For this test, sit toward the front of a sturdy chair, and stretch one leg straight out in front of you with your heel on the floor and your toes pointing up. Bend the other leg and place your foot flat on the floor. Slowly bend from your hips and reach as far as you can toward the toes of your outstretched foot. How far can you reach before you feel a stretch?

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Choosing Your Activities

Many Choices for Staying Active

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There are many ways to stay active. No matter what your age, you can find activities that meet your fitness level, physical abilities, and needs. Health experts say that older adults should be active every day to maintain their health, whether through physical activity or regular exercise. When thinking about ways to be active, consider doing exercises that you can fit into your daily life. Choose activities that appeal to you and that suit your lifestyle, budget, and health.

Do What You Enjoy

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Find activities you truly enjoy. If you prefer individual activities, try swimming, gardening, or walking. Dancing or playing tennis may be for you if you enjoy two-person activities. If group activities appeal to you, try a sport such as basketball or join an exercise class. Some people find that going to a gym regularly or working with a fitness trainer helps them stay motivated.

Consider Your Schedule and Budget

There are a number of ways to fit exercise and physical activity into your schedule. For example, you can be active in short spurts throughout the day, or you can set aside specific times of the day on specific days of the week to exercise. Another way is to combine physical activity with a task that's already part of your day, such as walking the dog or doing household chores. You could also check out an exercise video from the library or use the fitness center at a local senior center.

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Look for activities that are in line with your budget. Many physical activities -- such as brisk walking, raking leaves, or taking the stairs whenever you can -- are free or low cost and do not require special equipment

Health Considerations

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Of course, you should consider your health when deciding which activities you would like to do. You may want to talk with your doctor if you aren't used to energetic activity and you want to start a vigorous exercise program or significantly increase your physical activity. You also should talk with your doctor if you have recently had hip or back surgery, or you have uncontrolled health problems, or chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, or arthritis. Doctors rarely tell people not to exercise, but they may have certain safety tips for those who have these conditions.

Choose Variety

Most people tend to focus on one type of exercise or activity and think they're doing enough. Consider adding variety into your activity routine. Try to choose activities that include all four types of exercise -- endurance, strength, flexibility, and balance -- because each type has different benefits. Doing one kind also can improve your ability to do the others. In addition, variety helps reduce boredom and risk of injury.

Endurance Exercises

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Examples of physical activities that build endurance include:

- brisk walking
- yard work (mowing, raking)
- dancing
- aerobics classes
- jogging
- swimming, water exercises
- biking
- climbing stairs or hills
- playing tennis
- playing basketball

Strength Exercises

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Examples of physical activities that build strength include:

- lifting weights
- using a resistance band
- Pilates

Balance Exercises

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Examples of physical activities that improve balance include:

- standing on one foot
- heel-to-toe walk
- Tai Chi

Flexibility Exercises

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Examples of physical activities that increase flexibility include:

- shoulder and upper arm stretch
- calf stretch
- yoga

How Much, How Often?

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Try to do at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity endurance activity on most or all days of the week. If you don't have 30 minutes in your daily routine to be active, look for three 10-minute

periods. Getting this amount every day is best, but doing anything is better than doing nothing at all. When you do strength exercises, try to do them for all of your major muscle groups on 2 or more days a week for 30-minute sessions each, but don't do strength exercises of the same muscle group 2 days in a row.

Do You Need a Trainer?

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If you're not used to exercising, you may want to work with a personal fitness trainer. One of the best ways to find a personal trainer is to get a referral from someone you know who has a great trainer. Ask your friends and family or your health care provider. You also can check with a local health club or senior center. Once you have a couple of names, here are a few questions to help you pick the right person. If you can answer YES to most of these questions, you're probably on the right track.

Education and Experience of the Trainer

- Does the trainer have a certification from an accredited organization?
- Does the trainer have education or experience in exercise science, aging, and program design?
- Does the trainer have at least 2 years of experience, including experience training people your age?
- Will the trainer be able to develop an exercise program based on your goals, abilities, and health?
- Has the trainer worked with people with your medical conditions?
- Does the trainer know how to personalize your exercises based on medications you take?

Personality of the Trainer

- Did the trainer listen carefully to you and answer your questions?
- Does the trainer have a sense of humor and a personality that you like?

Business Practices of the Trainer

- Has the trainer told you what to expect from the sessions?
- Are the costs of the sessions and the cancellation policy clearly stated?
- Is the trainer insured or bonded?
- Will the trainer give you a list of clients so you can check references?

There are so many ways to stay active. No matter what your age, you can find activities that meet your fitness level, physical abilities, and needs.