

# Exercise for Older Adults

## Why should I exercise?

Exercise has many benefits. It can:

- Increase your strength and energy
- Improve your balance and coordination
- Lift your mood when you feel down
- Make your body look better and more toned
- Help you maintain a healthy weight or lose excess body fat
- Help you sleep
- Improve how you feel about yourself
- Help keep your bones strong throughout your lifetime
- Prevent diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease
- Help keep your mind sharp
- Decrease the chance of falls and injuries from falls
- Regular exercise makes it easier to do daily chores and to not become dependent on others.

## What kinds of exercise are best for me?

### Warming up and cooling down

- Muscles that are warmed-up before exercise are more flexible and less likely to be injured. Brisk walking, easy jogging, or jumping jacks are good ways to get your muscles warm and ready to go.
- After your muscles are warmed up, you may also want to stretch. Some people feel better if they stretch before and after exercise. Stretching after exercise is more important than stretching before exercise. It decreases the risk for being sore or injured.
- When you are about to stop, be sure to cool down by gradually slowing your activity.

### Aerobic

- The most important type of physical activity is called "aerobic". That means it makes your breathing and heart rate go up. This helps keep your heart and lungs healthy. Examples include walking, swimming, riding a bike, skateboarding, and dancing. Most school sports are aerobic and will give you a chance to get plenty of exercise several times a week. Tennis, hockey, rowing, soccer, basketball, volleyball, and cross-country running are all good examples of aerobic sports. But, you need to do them briskly so that your heart and breathing rate go up.
- The goal is to exercise for 2 hours and 30 minutes or more each week, in addition to your regular activities. You don't need to do 30 minutes of activity all at once - you can do shorter periods, at least 10 minutes each time. Aim for

a moderate level of effort that lets you talk while moving, but without getting out of breath.

### **Strengthening**

- Exercise to strengthen your muscles is recommended for most people. It includes weight lifting, stair stepping, carrying groceries, doing sit-ups or push-ups, and exercising with large elastic bands. When you work your muscles, they get stronger and able to work longer without getting tired. Stomach muscles support the back, so strengthening this area is really important. Muscle mass burns more calories than fat so as your muscle increases so does your ability to burn calories.
- The goal is to do 8 to 10 strengthening exercises on 2 days each week (skip at least one day in between). Repeat each exercise 8 or 12 times, then take a short break before doing the exercise again, or do a different exercise.

### **Flexibility**

- Flexibility exercises can help you move about more easily. Being flexible makes it easier to do many activities and also decreases risk for getting hurt. They help you use the full range of motion of your joints. Examples include stretching, yoga, and Tai chi.
- All ages can benefit from stretching. Always do stretching exercises after another activity so that your muscles are warmed up.

### **Balance**

Falls are a problem if you are older and have thin bones. If you fall, you may break a hip. Regular exercise helps to increase muscle strength and balance and makes it easier to move. All of this helps to prevent falls.

- Older adults at risk for falling should do balance exercises 3 or more days a week. Balance exercises include backward walking, sideways walking, walking on your heels, and walking on your toes. They can be done while holding onto something, such as a railing or furniture.

## **How do I choose the exercise that is best for me?**

Regular, moderate exercise is much more important for your health than strenuous exercise. In fact, exercise that is too strenuous can strain weak muscles and joints and cause problems. Start exercising slowly, especially if you have not exercised in some time.

The first thing you should do is check with your healthcare provider. Your provider may suggest a type and amount of exercise that would be best for you. The best kind of exercise program should include aerobic exercise, strengthening, and stretching exercises.

Choose exercise that doesn't stress your joints and that you can do every day, wherever you happen to be. Pick activities that you enjoy. You will be more likely to stick with them.

Aerobic exercise is good for your heart, lungs, and overall health. Walking, swimming, biking, and low-impact dancing are all good aerobic exercises. For

strength, try weight training. For older adults, there is less chance of injury if you use weight machines instead of free weights. Activities like yoga and tai chi help improve flexibility.

Probably the easiest and most convenient form of exercise for older people is walking. Start by walking at least a mile a day and gradually increase to whatever is comfortable and manageable and makes you feel good. Many shopping malls around the country offer senior walking programs in the mornings before the stores open, so you can walk year-round without worrying about the weather. Mall walks are a great way to start the day and a good way to get out and meet people.

Other forms of exercise that are popular among older people are swimming, dancing, group calisthenics, and biking. Many places besides health clubs have exercise programs for seniors. These include senior centers, YMCAs, YWCA, community centers, recreation centers, community colleges, and some retirement centers. Call your local senior center to find out what exercise programs are available in your neighborhood.

The choice of exercise is up to you. Do something that doesn't exhaust you or strain your muscles or joints. Also, choose exercise that you can do regularly. It is better to walk to the end of the street and back every day than to get no exercise. If you cannot walk well, you can learn to do chair aerobics exercises. Classes to learn these special exercises are given at many senior centers, or you can borrow or buy videos or DVDs that show how to do the exercises.

## **What else can I do to improve my health with exercise?**

- Before trying a new activity, learn how to do it first.
- Start slow and increase your activity over time. Think of a 10-point scale, where 0 is sitting and doing nothing and 10 is the most activity that you have ever done. Aim for activity that is a 5 or 6 for you.
- Sneak in more activity into your everyday tasks. For example, take the stairs instead of the elevator. Get on or off of the bus several blocks away. Every little bit helps. Take time for a short walk or bike ride a few times during the day.
- Pay attention to how you feel and don't overdo it. If you can't talk while doing your activity, you are working too hard. If you are unsure, ask your healthcare provider. Don't keep exercising if you feel breathless, dizzy, sweaty, or sick to your stomach. If you feel pain or discomfort in your chest, arms, neck, jaw, or legs, stop and rest. Sit down if you need to and ask a companion or a passer-by for help. Have your healthcare provider check you over. If you think you are in real trouble, call for help and have someone call 911.
- Always drink water before, during, and after exercise.
- Limit how much time you spend watching television, chatting on the computer, or playing video games. These activities are all fun and you don't have to give them up, but don't let them take the place of physical activities.

- Avoid exercise in very cold or very hot weather. If you are going to go out when it's very hot or cold, go with a buddy and a cell phone. Be sure you have the phone number for someone who could help if you got into trouble.
- Pay attention to your general health. Be sure to have regular health checkups. If your healthcare provider prescribes medicine, take it as directed.

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