

Health Benefits for Exercising

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Staying physically active and exercising regularly can produce long-term health benefits and even improve health for some older people who already have diseases and disabilities. That's why health experts say that older adults should aim to be as active as possible.



Although exercise and physical activity are among the healthiest things you can do for yourself, some older adults are reluctant to exercise. Some are afraid that exercise will be too hard or that physical activity will harm them. Others might think they have to join a gym or have special equipment. Yet, studies show that "taking it easy" is risky. For the most part, when older people lose their ability to do things on their own, it doesn't happen just because they've aged. It's usually because they're not active.

According to the U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health, inactive people are nearly twice as likely to develop heart disease as those who are more active. Lack of physical activity also can lead to more visits to the doctor, more hospitalizations, and more use of medicines for a variety of illnesses.

Scientists have found that staying physically active and exercising regularly can help prevent or delay many diseases and disabilities. In some cases, exercise is an effective treatment for many chronic conditions. For example, studies show that people with arthritis, heart disease, or diabetes benefit from regular exercise. Exercise also helps people with high blood pressure, balance problems, or difficulty walking.



Regular, moderate physical activity can help manage stress and improve your mood. And, being active on a regular basis may help reduce feelings of depression. Studies also suggest that exercise can improve or maintain some aspects of cognitive function, such as your ability to shift quickly between tasks, plan an activity, and ignore irrelevant information.

Some people may wonder what the difference is between physical activity and exercise. Physical activities are activities that get your body moving such as gardening, walking the dog and taking the stairs instead of the elevator. Exercise is a form of physical activity that is specifically planned, structured, and repetitive such as weight training, tai chi, or an aerobics class. Including both in your life will provide you with health benefits that can help you feel better and enjoy life more as you age.

Exercise Tips

Endurance exercises are activities that increase your heart rate and breathing for an extended period of time. Examples are walking, jogging, swimming, raking, sweeping, dancing, and playing tennis. Build up your endurance gradually, starting with as little as 5 minutes of endurance activities at a time, if you need to. Then try to build up to at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity endurance activity on most or all days of the week. Doing less than 10 minutes at a time won't give you the desired heart and lung benefits.

Safety tips:

- Do a little light activity, such as easy walking, before and after your endurance activities to warm up and cool down.
- Drink liquids when doing any activity that makes you sweat.
- Dress appropriately for the heat and cold. Dress in layers if you're outdoors so you can add or remove clothes as needed.
- When you're out walking, watch out for low-hanging branches and uneven sidewalks.
- Walk during the day or in well-lit areas at night, and be aware of your surroundings.
- To prevent injuries, use safety equipment such as helmets for biking.
- Endurance activities should not make you breathe so hard that you can't talk and should not cause dizziness or chest pain.

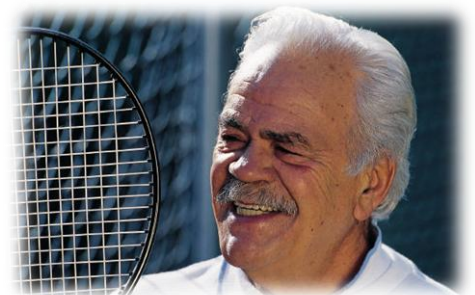


Here are some examples of moderate endurance activities for the average older adult. Older adults who have been inactive for a long time will need to work up to these activities gradually.

- walking briskly on a level surface
- swimming
- dancing
- gardening, mowing, raking
- cycling on a stationary bicycle
- bicycling
- playing tennis

These are examples of activities that are vigorous. People who have been inactive for a long time or who have certain health risks should not start out with these activities.

- playing basketball
- jogging
- climbing stairs or hills
- brisk bicycling up hills



Gradually working your way up is especially important if you have been inactive for a long time. It may take months to go from a very long-standing sedentary lifestyle to doing some of the activities suggested in this section.

When you're ready to do more, build up the amount of time you spend doing endurance activities first, then build up the difficulty of your activities. For example, gradually increase your time to 30 minutes over several days to weeks (or even months, depending on your condition) by walking longer distances. Then walk more briskly or up steeper hills.