

Living Actively for Good Health: Older Adults¹

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If you think physical activity is limited to strenuous activities like exercise classes and sports, think again! Read on to learn why physical activity is important and how you can get started.

What is physical activity and why is it important?



Physical activity is any body movement that uses energy, including daily activities such as house or yard work and walking. Regular physical activity helps keep the heart, lungs, bones, muscles, and joints healthy. It also helps:

- ▶ improve energy level and self-esteem
- ▶ decrease stress
- ▶ manage weight
- ▶ increase strength and flexibility
- ▶ control arthritis pain
- ▶ prevent or delay some diseases, such as heart disease and osteoporosis
- ▶ improve balance and decrease the risk of falling

Being active can help you improve your quality of life and stay independent longer.

How much and what types of activity do I need?

Aim for at least 30 minutes of a moderate-intensity *endurance* activity most days of the week. Moderate-intensity activity should increase your breathing and heart rate. Try walking, yard work, or vacuuming.

Plan to do some *strength* exercises like lifting weights or using resistance bands 2 or 3 times a week. With stronger muscles, you'll be able to do more things on your own. You don't need fancy weights; use books or cans!

Include *balance* exercises. Try standing on one leg and then the other, using a chair for balance; practice this 3 days a week to help prevent falls. Tai chi also helps with balance.

Include gentle stretches to be more flexible and give you more freedom of movement. Never stretch so far that it hurts. Gentle yoga also can help improve *flexibility*.



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Beating the Barriers

Not enough time. Remember the goal is to get at least 30 minutes of activity during day. It doesn't have to be all at once.

☐ Work in the garden in the morning.

☐ Mop your floor while watching TV.

☐ Take a short walk after dinner.



Too boring. Choose activities that you enjoy and invite a friend along. Vary your activities and routines—try a different walking path.

Not motivated. Set realistic short- and long-term goals. Reward yourself when you reach them! Keep an activity log so you can look back and see how far you've come. Find an exercise partner!



Not enough energy. Physical activity actually increases your energy level. Be active for 5 minutes and if you're tired after that time, stop. But chances are you'll feel like continuing!

Many people find that once they start being active, it feels so good that it becomes fun and enjoyable! But if physical activity sounds overwhelming, don't despair—if you haven't been active, start slowly and increase your activity gradually. Remember, doing something is better than doing nothing!

Tips for Keeping it Safe

Get a check-up. Most older adults can safely be more physically active. However, first talk with your health care provider if:

- you have diabetes, heart disease, or another chronic health condition
- you are at high risk for heart disease
- you are not used to physical activity or you plan to start doing **vigorous** activity (activity that makes you breathe and sweat hard)

Drink water before, during, and after activity.



Warm up and cool down. Some light activity and stretching before and after your moderate-intensity activity reduces your risk of injury.

Be cautious. Tell someone where you are going, and wear reflective clothing or shoes if you are outside at night. Exercise with a buddy.

How much is too much?

Your body will tell you if you're doing too much. Pay attention to warning pains and STOP if you don't feel right. Seek medical advice if you become dizzy or have an injury, severe muscle soreness, or chest pain.

For a free exercise guide from the National Institute on Aging, call 1-800-222-2225 (toll-free) and ask for *Exercise and Physical Activity: Your Everyday Guide from the National Institute on Aging*, or visit <http://www.nia.nih.gov>.

It's easy to get started and make regular physical activity a lifelong habit!

- Talk to your health care provider if needed.
- Choose an activity you enjoy.
- Start slowly and increase your activity gradually.