Physical activity for older adults

Regular physical activity is one of the most important things older adults can do for their health. Physical activity can prevent many of the health problems that may come with age.

If adults aged 65 years of age or older are generally well, they can follow the guidelines listed below.

What type of activity does an older adult need?

According to the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, older adults need to do two types of physical activity to improve health – aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities.

If older adults have a chronic disease or other health condition that might limit activity and prevent them from meeting the guidelines, they should talk with their health-care provider about setting physical activity goals. They should avoid an inactive lifestyle. Inactive older adults should increase physical activity gradually. Older adults should also do exercises that maintain or improve balance.

How much activity does an older adult need?

For substantial health benefits, older adults need to do at least 2 hours and 30 minutes (150 minutes) of moderate-intensity* aerobic activity each week. One minute of vigorous activity counts as two minutes of moderate-intensity activity.

Intensity is the level of effort required to do an activity. On a scale of 0 to 10, where sitting is 0 and the highest level of effort possible is 10, moderate-intensity activity is a 5 or 6. Vigorous-intensity activity is a 7 or 8.

The intensity of an activity will not be the same for different individuals due to their level of fitness.

*How to judge intensity: A person doing moderate-intensity aerobic activity can talk, but not sing, during the activity. A person doing vigorous-intensity activity cannot say more than a few words without pausing for a breath.

Greater health benefits occur as people increase the amount of time spent in physical activity each day.

Older adults with chronic conditions should engage in regular physical activity because it can help improve their quality of life and reduce the risk of developing new conditions.

They should decide on the type and amount of activity based on their abilities and on the severity of the chronic condition. In many cases, physical activity can improve symptoms and is part of the recommended treatment for many conditions.
Aerobic activity should be performed at least 10 minutes at a time for an average of 30 minutes a day, and spread throughout the week.

- Walking
- Dancing
- Swimming
- Water aerobics
- Jogging
- Aerobic exercise classes
- Bicycle riding (stationary or on a path)
- Raking and mowing lawn
- Tennis
- Golf (without a cart)

**Muscle-Strengthening Activities**

Muscle-strengthening activities should be done at least two days a week. *Allow at least one day of rest between exercises of a particular muscle group.* However, you can exercise different muscle groups on subsequent days.

Choose different activities to work all major muscle groups: legs, hips, back, chest, abdomen, shoulders, and arms.


Exercises for each muscle group should be repeated 8 to 12 times per set. As exercises become easier, you may increase the weight, but be careful to maintain good form in order to prevent injury.

Types of muscle-strengthen activities include:

- Lifting weights
- Working with resistance bands
- Doing exercises that use body weight for resistance (push-ups, sit-ups)

Older adults can do activities that strengthen muscles on the same day or different days that they do aerobic activity, whichever works best.

**Health Benefits**

Participating in regular physical activity provides many health benefits. Reducing the risk of some conditions may require long-term participation, but the results are worth it. Other benefits, such as increased heart and lung fitness and reducing blood sugar may require only a few weeks or months of participation.

Most adults begin to lose muscle after the age of 40. As a person ages, they often become frail. The loss of muscle decreases balance and may lead to falls. Many older people do not fully recover from a fall.

**Strengthening muscles is important not only for extending years of life, but extending years of quality life.**

It is never too late to begin exercising, but the earlier one starts to maintain and build muscle, the more benefits they will experience.

**Physical Activity Protects the Brain**

People who exercise later in life may protect their brain from age-related changes. Researchers found that people over 70 who engaged in regular exercise showed less brain shrinkage and less damage to the brain’s white matter (the wiring that transmits messages around the brain). Maintaining brain size and white matter helps improve memory and other cognitive functions.


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