

Exercise Information for Aging Adults

Staying physically active is important as you age. Physical activity and exercise can help in maintaining quality of life, health, physical function, and reducing falls. The four types of exercises that are best for older adults are endurance, strength, balance, and flexibility. Contact your health care provider before you start any exercise routine. Ask your health care provider what activities are safe for you.

What are the risks?

Risks associated with exercising include:

- Overdoing it. This may lead to sore muscles or fatigue.
- Falls.
- Injuries.
- Dehydration.

How to do these exercises

Endurance exercises



Endurance (*aerobic*) exercises raise your breathing rate and heart rate. Increasing your endurance helps you do everyday tasks and stay healthy. By improving the health of your body system that includes your heart, lungs, and blood vessels (*circulatory system*), you may also delay or prevent diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and weak bones (*osteoporosis*). Types of endurance exercises include:

- Sports.
- Indoor activities, such as using gym equipment, doing water aerobics, or dancing.
- Outdoor activities, such as biking or jogging.
- Tasks around the house, such as gardening, yard work, and heavy household chores like cleaning.
- Walking, such as hiking or walking around your neighborhood.

When doing endurance exercises, make sure you:

- Are aware of your surroundings.
- Use safety equipment as directed.
- Dress in layers when exercising outdoors.
- Drink plenty of water to stay well hydrated.

Build up endurance slowly. Start with 10 minutes at a time, and gradually build up to doing 30 minutes at a time. Unless your health care provider gave you different instructions, aim to exercise for a total of 150 minutes a week. Spread out that time so you are working on endurance 3 or more days a week.

Strength exercises



Lifting, pulling, or pushing weights helps to strengthen muscles. Having stronger muscles makes it easier to do everyday activities, such as getting up from a chair, climbing stairs, carrying groceries, and playing with grandchildren. Strength exercises include arm and leg exercises that may be done:

- With weights.
- Without weights (using your own body weight).
- With a resistance band.

When doing strength exercises:

- Move smoothly and steadily. **Do not** suddenly thrust or jerk the weights, the resistance band, or your body.
- Start with no weights or with light weights, and gradually add more weight over time. Eventually, aim to use weights that are hard or very hard for you to lift. This means that you are able to do 8 repetitions with the weight, and the last few repetitions are very challenging.
- Lift or push weights into position for 3 seconds, hold the position for 1 second, and then take 3 seconds to return to your starting position.
- Breathe out (*exhale*) during difficult movements, like lifting or pushing weights. Breathe in (*inhale*) to relax your muscles before the next repetition.
- Consider alternating arms or legs, especially when you first start strength exercises.
- Expect some slight muscle soreness after each session.

Do strength exercises on 2 or more days a week, for 30 minutes at a time. Avoid exercising the same muscle groups two days in a row. For example, if you work on your leg muscles one day, work on your arm muscles the next day. When you can do two sets of 10–15 repetitions with a certain weight, increase the amount of weight.

Balance exercises

Balance exercises can help to prevent falls. Balance exercises include:

- Standing on one foot.
- Heel-to-toe walk.
- Balance walk.
- Tai chi.

Make sure you have something sturdy to hold onto while doing balance exercises, such as a sturdy chair. As your balance improves, challenge yourself by holding on to the chair with one hand instead of two, and then with no hands. Trying exercises with your eyes closed also challenges your balance, but be sure to have a sturdy surface (like a countertop) close by in case you need it.

Do balance exercises as often as you want, or as often as directed by your health care provider.

Flexibility exercises



Flexibility exercises improve how far you can bend, straighten, move, or rotate parts of your body (*range of motion*). These exercises also help you do everyday activities such as getting dressed or reaching for objects. Flexibility exercises include stretching different parts of the body, and they may be done in a standing or seated position or on the floor.

When stretching, make sure you:

- Keep a slight bend in your arms and legs. Avoid completely straightening ("locking") your joints.
- **Do not** stretch so far that you feel pain. You should feel a mild stretching feeling. You may try stretching farther as you become more flexible over time.
- Relax and breathe between stretches.
- Hold on to something sturdy for balance as needed.

Hold each stretch for 10–30 seconds. Repeat each stretch 3–5 times.

General safety tips

- Exercise in well-lit areas.
- **Do not** hold your breath during exercises or stretches.
- Warm up before exercising, and cool down after exercising. This can help prevent injury.
- Drink plenty of water during exercise or any activity that makes you sweat.
- If you are not sure if an exercise is safe for you, or you are not sure how to do an exercise, talk with your health care provider. This is especially important if you have had surgery on muscles, bones, or joints (*orthopedic surgery*).

Where to find more information

You can find more information about exercise for older adults from:

- Your local health department, fitness center, or community center. These facilities may have programs for aging adults.
- National Institute on Aging: www.nia.nih.gov
- National Council on Aging: www.ncoa.org

Summary

- Staying physically active is important as you age.
- Doing endurance, strength, balance, and flexibility exercises can help in maintaining quality of life, health, physical function, and reducing falls.
- Make sure to contact your health care provider before you start any exercise routine. Ask your health care provider what activities are safe for you.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

