

## **Benefits of Exercise**

### **Health Benefits**

#### **One of the Healthiest Things You Can Do**

Like most people, you've probably heard that physical activity and exercise are good for you. In fact, being physically active on a regular basis is one of the healthiest things you can do for yourself. Studies have shown that exercise provides many health benefits and that older adults can gain a lot by staying physically active. Even moderate exercise and physical activity can improve the health of people who are frail or who have diseases that accompany aging.

Being physically active can also help you stay strong and fit enough to keep doing the things you like to do as you get older. Making exercise and physical activity a regular part of your life can improve your health and help you maintain your independence as you age.

#### **Be as Active as Possible**

Regular physical activity and exercise are important to the physical and mental health of almost everyone, including older adults. 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.

#### **Being Inactive Can Be Risky**

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.

### **Manage Stress, Improve Mood**

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.

### **Physical Activity or Exercise?**

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.

### **Benefits for Everyday Life**

#### **Staying Strong, Fit, and Independent**

Exercise and physical activity are great ways to have fun, be with friends and family, and enjoy the outdoors. But regular exercise and physical activity can also have a direct impact on your everyday life. The benefits they provide can help you stay

strong and fit enough to perform your daily activities, get around, and maintain your independence.

Older adults who are inactive lose ground in four areas that are important for staying healthy and independent: endurance, strength, balance, and flexibility. Research suggests that you can maintain or at least partially restore these four areas through exercise and physical activity and that doing so improves fitness.

### **How Increased Endurance Helps You**

For example, increasing your endurance will make it easier for you to walk farther, faster, and uphill. Strengthening your muscles will make you stronger. Improving your balance can help your sense of body control, and increasing flexibility helps keep your body limber and flexible. The goal is to be creative and choose from each of the four types -- endurance, strength, balance, and flexibility. Mixing it up will help you reap the benefits of each type of exercise, as well as reduce the risk for injury.

Endurance, or aerobic, activities like brisk walking or swimming increase your breathing and heart rate. They can make it easier for you to

- push your grandchildren on the swings
- vacuum
- work in the garden
- rake leaves
- play a sport

### **How Increased Muscle Strength Helps You**

Strength exercises like lifting weights and using resistance bands can increase muscle strength. Lower-body strength exercises also will improve your balance. Increased muscle strength can maintain your ability to

- climb stairs
- carry groceries
- open jars
- carry a full laundry basket from the basement to the second floor
- carry your smaller grandchildren
- lift bags of mulch in the garden

### **How Good Balance Helps You**

Balance exercises like tai chi can improve your ability to control and maintain your body's position, whether you are moving or still. Good balance is important to help prevent falls and avoid the disability that may result from falling. Balance exercises can help you

- prevent falls
- stand on tiptoe to reach something on the top shelf
- walk up and down the stairs
- walk on an uneven sidewalk without falling

## **How Being Flexible Helps You**

Stretching can help your body stay flexible and limber, which gives you more freedom of movement for your regular physical activity as well as for your everyday activities. Stretching exercises can improve your flexibility but will not improve your endurance or strength.

Flexibility, or stretching, exercises make it possible for you to

- look over your shoulder to see what's behind you as you back the car out of the driveway
- make the bed
- bend over to tie your shoes
- reach for a food item on a kitchen shelf
- pull a sweater on over your head
- swing a golf club

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## **It's Never Too Late to Start**

Exercise and physical activity can have a positive effect on your everyday life. Even if you think you're too old or too out of shape to exercise, becoming active on a regular basis will give you more energy and the ability to do things more easily, faster, and for longer than before. If you're already active, keep up the good work. If you don't exercise now, it's never too late to start.

> [NIH Exercise and Physical Activity page](#).

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