
Physical activity for seniors

Summary

- Only around one in 10 Australians over the age of 50 years exercises enough to gain any cardiovascular benefit.
 - Some estimates suggest that about half of the physical decline associated with old age may be due to lack of physical activity.
 - If you are over 40 years, obese, suffer from a chronic illness or have been sedentary for some time, see your doctor before embarking on any new exercise routine.
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Only around one in 10 Australians over the age of 50 exercises enough to gain any cardiovascular benefit. Some estimates suggest that about half of the physical decline associated with old age may be due to a lack of physical activity. It has been suggested that people over the age of 65, more than any other age group, require adequate fitness levels to help them maintain independence, recover from illness and reduce their high risk of disease.

Various studies show that it is never too late to get fit. The human body responds to exercise, no matter what its age, and there are many health benefits. If you are over 40 years, obese, suffer from a chronic illness or have been sedentary for some time, it is a good idea to check with your doctor before embarking on any new exercise routine.

The physical decline of older age

About half of the physical decline associated with ageing may be due to a lack of physical activity. Without regular exercise, people over the age of 50 years can experience a range of health problems including:

- Reduced muscle mass, strength and physical endurance
- Reduced coordination and balance
- Reduced joint flexibility and mobility
- Reduced cardiovascular and respiratory function
- Reduced bone strength
- Increased body fat levels
- Increased blood pressure
- Increased susceptibility to mood disorders, such as anxiety and depression
- Increased risk of various diseases including cardiovascular disease and stroke.

Common myths

Many older people believe that exercise is no longer appropriate. Some of the common misconceptions that prompt older people to abandon physical activity include:

- Older people are frail and physically weak.
- The human body doesn't need as much physical activity as it ages.
- Exercising is hazardous for older people because they may injure themselves.
- Only vigorous and sustained exercise is of any use.

Other barriers to exercise

Other factors that may contribute to the lack of physical exercise among people over 50 years include:

- Some older people may have a preference for sedentary activities, such as reading and socialising.
 - The relatively high cost of some sports may exclude some people.
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- Many sports and activities tend to attract young adults, so older people may feel unwelcome.
- The physical fitness marketplace has failed to include and attract older people.

Benefits to the older body

Some of the many benefits of regular exercise for older people include:

- **Muscle** – the amount and size of muscle fibres decreases with age. Some studies suggest that the average body loses around 3kg of lean muscle every decade from middle age. The muscle fibres that seem to be most affected are those of the ‘fast twitch’ (phasic) variety, which govern strength and speedy contraction. There is evidence to suggest that these changes are related to a sedentary lifestyle, rather than age. Muscle mass can increase in the older person after regularly exercising for a relatively short period of time.
- **Bone** – bone density begins to decline after the age of 40, but this loss accelerates around the age of 50 years. As a result of this bone loss, older people are more prone to bone fractures. Exercise may help to reduce the risk of bone loss and osteoporosis. Weight-bearing exercise, in particular, helps to keep bones healthy and strong.
- **Heart and lungs** – moderate intensity exercise is most favourable: for example, exercising at about 70 per cent of the individual’s maximum heart rate (220 beats per minute minus your age). Studies show that cardiorespiratory fitness takes longer to achieve in an older person than a young person, but the physical benefits are similar. Regardless of age, people are able to improve their cardiorespiratory fitness through regular exercise.
- **Joints** – the joints of the body require regular movement to remain supple and healthy. In particular, people with arthritis can benefit from aerobic and strengthening exercise programs.
- **Body fat levels** – carrying too much body fat has been associated with a range of diseases including cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Regular exercise burns kilojoules, increases muscle mass and speeds the metabolism. Together, these physiological changes help an older person maintain an appropriate weight for their height and build.

Getting active

Suggestions include:

- If you are over 40 years, obese, suffer from a chronic illness or have been sedentary for some time, see your doctor before you start a new exercise routine.
- Choose activities you find interesting. You are more likely to keep up with an exercise routine if it’s fun rather than a chore.
- Exercise with friends. Make physical activity an enjoyable social occasion.
- Safe, easy and comfortable forms of exercise include walking, swimming and cycling.
- Weight training can increase your muscle mass – programs as short as six to eight weeks can be beneficial.
- Start off slowly and aim for small improvements. Keep track of your progress in a training diary for added motivation.
- Check your pulse frequently to make sure you aren’t overdoing it.
- Choose appropriate clothing and safety gear.
- Don’t let yourself dehydrate – drink plenty of water.

You will find more information and suggestions in the Australian Government’s physical activity guide for older Australians: *Choose Health: Be Active*.

People with chronic illnesses

Some older people have chronic illnesses (such as severe arthritis, osteoporosis or advanced cardiovascular disease) that limit their choice of physical activities. In these situations, it is best to consult closely with your doctor, physiotherapist or health care professional to devise an exercise program that is healthy and safe.

Pre-exercise screening is used to identify people with medical conditions that may put them at a higher risk of experiencing a health problem during physical activity. It is a filter or ‘safety net’ to help decide if the potential

benefits of exercise outweigh the risks for you. Print a copy of the **pre-exercise screening tool** and discuss it with your doctor or exercise professional.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Physiotherapist
- **Australian Physiotherapy Association** Tel. **(03) 9091 0888**
- **Seniors Online**

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