Physical activity for seniors

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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.

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

- 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 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.
- 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 Information Victoria Tel. 1300 135 090

Things to remember

- 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.
2. **Embrace your inner child**

What types of activities did you enjoy when you were a kid? Did you participate in an organised team sport or do something less structured? Give them a try again. Take time out to discover what suits your physical, emotional and social needs.

3. **Find an exercise buddy**

Let’s face it, we’re more likely to stick to physical activity if we do it with friends or family. It’s a great way to catch up and a great motivator.
4. **Explore the local community**

Join a club or community group – it’s a great way to meet new people who may even become lifelong friends. You’ll be surprised how many opportunities are out there – from leisure centres and sports clubs to parks, trails, swimming pools and classes. Local councils and libraries can help you track them down.

5. **Be kind to yourself**

Make sure you have a medical check up before starting any form of physical activity, especially if you’re over 40, overweight, haven’t exercised for a long time or have a chronic illness. Fill out this pre-exercise self-screening tool for adults.
6. Start small

Increase your activity time and intensity gradually. Take extra care if you are new to exercise or haven’t exercised for a while. Start out gently and build your endurance little by little – this way you’ll avoid overdoing it or injuring yourself! It’s a good idea to start with 10 minutes each day at first and then eventually work your way up to 30 minutes or more.

7. Mix it up

Not only does a range of activities keep your interest up, they challenge different muscles. If you’re time and budget poor, be creative and look for other alternatives. Walk or cycle to work, take the stairs or leave the car at home when running errands. Buy some exercise equipment for home, such as online exercise videos or DVDs. A stationary bike is fun to ride while watching TV.

8. Up for a challenge?

Keep up your interest by trying new activities. You may like to join others and sign up to a local fitness event, such as a fun run that raises money for a good cause. You’ll not only be helping yourself, but others in the process.
Try a mantra

Replace ‘no pain no gain’ with ‘no fun no future’. If you are not enjoying yourself, you won’t be able to sustain it.

Be realistic

Set a mixture of short and long-term goals that are achievable and you can measure. When you first begin, mark dates and times in your diary for exercise sessions. Review your progress regularly and focus on what you have achieved.
11. **Don’t beat yourself up**

If you miss a session that’s okay, even elite athletes need downtime after participating in rigorous activities. If you’re not in the mood, it’s important to focus on how exercise makes you feel – it not only relieves stress but helps fight sadness and depression!

12. **Keep a training diary or journal**

Take time to recognise these little improvements to your daily quality of life – it can increase your motivation. Reflect on how you feel before, during and after exercise. It’s a great way to track your progress.
Reward yourself

Give yourself a reward each time you reach a fitness goal. It gives you the incentive to keep going. Treat yourself to something you enjoy, but make sure your rewards match your healthy lifestyle. As you make progress, you may find you end up rewarding yourself with something physical, such as a walk by the beach or river after a hard day’s work!

References

- National physical activity recommendations for older Australians More information here.
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More information

Keeping active

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Keeping active basics
- Getting started
- Staying fit and motivated
- Exercise safety and injury prevention
- Healthy eating and exercise
- Keeping active throughout life
- Health conditions and exercise

Keeping active basics

- Balancing energy in and energy out
  A kilojoule is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance.
- Body mass index (BMI)
  Body mass index or BMI is an approximate measure of your total body fat.
- Energy in food (kilojoules and calories)
  A kilojoule is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance.
- Exercise intensity
  If you can talk but not sing, you're exercising at the right intensity.
- Exercise in your local surroundings (video)
  Want to exercise, but find gyms boring or expensive? Sue Stanley and Shane Bilsborough team up to show you how to exercise indoors and outdoors using your local surroundings - whether it's running up...
- Exercise - the low-down on hydration
  You need to drink enough and regularly to keep hydrated during exercise.
- Exercise with a friend
  Exercise is important for your physical and mental health. Working out with a friend means you're more likely to have fun and stick to your exercise plan.
- Fitness centres – how to choose one
  Do some research before signing up at a fitness centre.
- How to make exercise fun
  Many of us find it difficult to stick to some form of exercise, others don't know where to start. Experts say the key to taking up or keeping to any form of physical activity is to have fun. Get off...
- Kids and energy needs
  It’s important for kids to eat a wide variety of foods for a healthy, well-balanced diet and to be physically active. Creating healthy habits during childhood helps to ensure lifelong healthy.
- Personal trainers – how to choose one

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Make sure your personal trainer is properly qualified before entering into any agreement.

- Physical activity for men
  Many men are only motivated to become more active after they have a health scare.

- Physical activity for seniors
  Physical activity can help older people maintain independence, recover from illness and reduce their risk of disease.

- Physical activity for women
  If you can't make the time to exercise for yourself, do it for your family.
  Physical activity - how to get active when you are busy
  Even if you're busy, you still need to find a way to be physically active.

- Physical activity - it's important
  Just 30 minutes of moderate activity each day can improve your health and reduce the risk of developing certain conditions or diseases.

- Physical activity - setting yourself goals
  When you're trying to become more physically active, set realistic health and fitness goals.

- Physical activity - what's your excuse?
  There are many excuses we can come up with to avoid being active, but the truth is there is always a way to fit some physical activity into your day.

- Resistance training - health benefits
  If you do resistance training repeatedly and consistently, your muscles become stronger.

- Secrets to healthy aging
  Experts say the key to living well into our 80s and 90s is making a commitment to live healthily. Check out these simple ideas and embrace your senior years!

Getting started

- Exercise programs
  If you are unfamiliar with what is involved, starting an exercise program can be challenging.

- Exercise - the low-down on hydration
  You need to drink enough and regularly to keep hydrated during exercise.

- Exercise with a friend
  Exercise is important for your physical and mental health. Working out with a friend means you're more likely to have fun and stick to your exercise plan.

- Gardening for children
  Children can learn new skills, have fun and develop self-confidence when they grow their own plants.

- Gardening for health - starting out
  Gardening is a healthy activity that can be enjoyed by everyone.

- Gardening for older people
  Garden spaces and equipment can be modified or adapted to help older people enjoy gardening.

- Gardening safety
  Gardening is an enjoyable form of exercise, but you need to take care.

- Getting active - tucker talk tips
  The main thing is to choose physical activities that you enjoy and that you can stick to in the long term.

- How to make exercise fun
  Many of us find it difficult to stick to some form of exercise, others don’t know where to start. Experts say the key to taking up or keeping to any form of physical activity is to have fun. Get off...

- Physical activity - choosing a provider
  Choosing the right fitness centre or service provider requires some research.

- Physical activity - choosing the one for you
  You are more likely to keep up a healthy lifestyle change if your chosen activity suits you.

- Physical activity for men
  Many men are only motivated to become more active after they have a health scare.
Physical activity for seniors

Physical activity can help older people maintain independence, recover from illness and reduce their risk of disease.

Physical activity for women

If you can't make the time to exercise for yourself, do it for your family.

Physical activity - how to get active when you are busy

Even if you’re busy, you still need to find a way to be physically active.

Physical activity - how to get started

If you’ve been inactive and want to begin physical activity, see a doctor first.

Physical activity - learn how to swim (video)

Swimming is a great low-impact exercise for all ages and abilities. Australian marathon swimmer, Tammy Van Wisse shows ex-AFL (Australian Football League) player and coach, Tony Shaw some swimming.

Physical activity - overcoming barriers (video)

Former world aerobics champion, Sue Stanley shows us how to overcome common exercise excuses.

Physical activity – setting yourself goals

When you're trying to become more physically active, set realistic health and fitness goals.

Staying fit and motivated

10 tips to plan your exercise

Physical activity won’t just happen. Most activities require planning – starting and maintaining a physical activity program does too. Here are some tips for getting ready to exercise. Make:

10 tips to stay active year round

Pick an activity you enjoy ... 10 tips to stay active year round.

Exercise and mood

Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise... 

Exercise – everyday activities

There are lots of everyday activities that provide an opportunity to be active and provide health benefits.

Exercise in your local surroundings (video)

Want to exercise, but find gyms boring or expensive? Sue Stanley and Shane Bilsborough team up to show you how to exercise indoors and outdoors using your local surroundings - whether it's running up...

Exercise programs

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Exercise with a friend

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How to make exercise fun

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Pets can make you healthy (video)

Australians have one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world.

Physical activity – choosing the one for you

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Physical activity - overcoming barriers (video)
Former world aerobics champion, Sue Stanley shows us how to overcome common exercise excuses.

Physical activity - staying active during summer (video)
Physical Activity and Fitness Trainer Sherri Bourne gives us some great tips for staying active over the summer months.

Physical activity - staying motivated
Pick an exercise or fitness activity that appeals to you and suits your lifestyle.

Physical activity - what's your excuse?
There are many excuses we can come up with to avoid being active, but the truth is there is always a way to fit some physical activity into your day.

Stretching exercise in winter (video)
When starting out an exercise program, it's really important to do a warm up and cool down before and after exercise.

Exercise safety and injury prevention

10 tips for safe stretching
Make stretching part of your life — 10 tips for safe stretching.

10 tips to exercise safely
Exercising regularly has wide-ranging physical, emotional and social health benefits. You need to exercise safely to remain healthy and injury-free. If it’s safe and painless, you're more...

Aerobics - preventing injury
Aerobics injuries are usually caused by trauma and overuse, but can be prevented by using the right techniques and equipment.

Australian rules football - preventing injury
Australian rules football is a physical contact sport that often results in injuries from tackling, kicking, running and constant competition for the ball.

Basketball - health benefits
Basketball is a sport enjoyed by people of all ages and abilities.

Basketball - preventing injury
Basketball is a fast game with frequent and aggressive body contacts - injuries can and do occur.

Canoeing and kayaking - health benefits
Canoeing and kayaking can be done on a hobby, a competitive sport or as a fun activity on holidays.

Canoeing and kayaking - preventing injury
Careful preparation and the right equipment can help prevent canoeing and kayaking injuries.

Cricket - health benefits
To play cricket you need to be fit and strong and have good hand-eye coordination and ball-handling skills.

Cricket - preventing injury
Cricket is a very popular sport. Injuries are often caused by overswing, being struck by a cricket ball and falls.

Cycling - health benefits
Cycling can help to protect you from serious diseases.

Cycling - preventing injury
You are much more likely to hurt yourself by falling off your bike or hitting a stationary object than colliding with another vehicle.

Dance - health benefits
Dancing can be a fun way to stay fit for people of all ages and abilities.

Dancing - preventing injury
Dancing is fun and a great form of exercise, but make sure you avoid injuries.

- **Dog walking - the health benefits**
  If you are planning to buy a dog, make sure you choose a breed that's appropriate to your lifestyle.

- **Exercise safety**
  Training too hard or fast is a common cause of sports-related injuries.

- **Fishing - preventing injury**
  Never go fishing alone? Always fish with someone else and, ideally, with two other people.

- **Golf - health benefits**
  Golf provides a stimulating challenge, combined with a healthy walk in pleasant surroundings.

- **Golf - preventing injury**
  The average golfer playing an 18-hole game walks about seven kilometres.

- **Heat stress and exercise**
  Heat stress occurs when sweat can't evaporate fast enough to keep the body sufficiently cool during physical activity.

### Healthy eating and exercise

- **Food for sport - tucker talk tips**
  Carbohydrate is the most important nutrient for athletes.

- **Secrets to healthy ageing**
  Experts say the key to living well into our 80s and 90s is making a commitment to live healthily. Check out these simple ideas and embrace your senior years!

- **Sporting performance and food**
  Good nutrition and a healthy diet are essential to improving your sports performance.

- **The amount of physical activity you need**
  It's important for your health that you get enough physical activity every day, and that you limit your sedentary behaviour. But getting the amount of physical activity you need doesn’t have to be...

### Keeping active throughout life

- **10 tips for active seniors**
  Stay independent for longer with regular exercise – 10 tips for active seniors.

- **Children – keeping them active**
  A young child is naturally active, so build upon their inclinations to use their body.

- **Exercise and stretching in the office (video)**
  Sitting behind a desk all day doesn't mean you can't exercise.

- **Gardens for all – a health activity**
  Gardening has many health and therapeutic benefits, and is an activity that most people can enjoy.

- **Getting active – tucker talk tips**
  The main thing is to choose physical activities that you enjoy and that you can stick to in the long term.

- **Healthy active Koori kids – tucker talk tips**
  Good nutrition and physical exercise help to keep Koori kids healthy and avoid diseases when they get older.

- **Healthy ageing – stay involved**
  Reach out to the world around you for fun, a sense of achievement, social contact and mental stimulation.

- **Healthy and active ageing**
  Being physically active, eating well, socialising and improving your health can help you live a healthy, happy and active life as you get older.

- **How to make exercise fun**
  Many of us find it difficult to stick to some form of exercise, others don’t know where to start. Experts say the key to taking up or keeping to any form of physical activity is to have fun. Get off...

- **How to volunteer and boost your health**
  Volunteering is great for our health – it makes us feel good, while helping others in the process.

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Older people in hospital – Get well soon
Learn about improving and maintaining your health during a hospital stay...

Parent's guide for active girls
Physical activity is an important part of health and wellbeing, and girls should remain active as they grow up...

Physical activity for men
Many men are only motivated to become more active after they have a health scare...

Physical activity for seniors
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Physical activity - what's your excuse?
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Postnatal exercise
Always consult with your doctor or midwife before starting any postnatal exercise program...

Pregnancy and exercise
Unless you have complications, you should be able to exercise throughout your pregnancy...

Secrets to healthy ageing
Experts say the key to living well into our 80s and 90s is making a commitment to live healthily. Check out these simple ideas and embrace your senior years!

Sport and children
Make sure that some family outings offer opportunities for physical activity, such as playing sport together...

The amount of physical activity you need
It's important for your health that you get enough physical activity every day, and that you limit your sedentary behaviour. But getting the amount of physical activity you need doesn't have to be...

Vision loss and sport
Many sports can be adapted to suit people who are blind or have low vision...

Walking - the benefits for older people
Walking is great exercise for older people. It has a range of health and social benefits, and most people can do it...

Health conditions and exercise

Arthritis and exercise
Exercise can reduce some of the symptoms of arthritis, and improve joint mobility and strength...

Asthma and exercise
Exercise-induced asthma can be prevented with medication and by preparing for exercise and physical activity...

Breathing problems and exercise
A little physical activity and some breathing exercises can help people with lung disease...

Cancer - exercise to help you cope
People with cancer should be as physically active as their abilities and condition allow...

Dementia - reducing your risk
Adopting a 'brain healthy' lifestyle may reduce your risk of dementia in later life...

Diabetes - issues for children and teenagers
Many parents worry when their child with diabetes starts or returns to school...

Epilepsy and employment
Many people living with epilepsy are successfully employed across a range of professional fields...

Epilepsy and exercise
It is rare for a person with epilepsy to have a seizure during physical activity, but you should always take safety precautions when exercising...

- Exercise and mood
  Exercise can have an enormous impact on your mood. Not only can exercise help in treating depression, it can also prevent people from becoming depressed again. So it’s important to keep up an exercise...

- Exercise in your local surroundings (video)
  Want to exercise, but find gyms boring or expensive? Sue Stanley and Shane Bilsborough team up to show you how to exercise indoors and outdoors using your local surroundings - whether it's running up...

- HIV, hepatitis and sport
  People with HIV or hepatitis B or C participate in a wide range of sports without restrictions, and the risk of transmission to another player is extremely small...

- Menstruation - athletic amenorrhoea
  Women who are athletes or who exercise a lot on a regular basis are at risk of developing athletic amenorrhoea, which is the absence of periods...

- Osteoporosis and exercise
  Exercise can reduce the risk of fractures resulting from osteoporosis by both slowing the rate of bone loss, and reducing the person’s risk of falling by building muscle strength and improving balance...

- Sports injuries
  A sports injury may be more severe than you think...

- Type 2 diabetes - healthy eating and exercise (video)
  People with type 2 diabetes talk about positive lifestyle changes that improve their quality of life...

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- Choose Health Be Active: A physical activity guide for older Australians
- Council on the Ageing
- Healthy Active Australia
- Heart Foundation, Australia
- Seniors Information Service
- Victoria Walks

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The Department of Health and Human Services - Well for life - A healthy approach to ageing booklet (pdf)

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