

Fitness for Older Adults

Keeping active and remaining fit can help prolong your life and can even help prevent or delay illnesses or disabilities as you grow older. The benefits of physical activity extend throughout life and can improve many health conditions. Being active helps lower your risk of falls and developing heart disease and diabetes and can help you live on your own longer. Fitness and physical activity are safe for most older adults—even for those with stable chronic conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, and arthritis. Your doctor can advise you about the safety of certain activities and increasing your fitness level. The July 12, 2006, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about how daily activity levels in healthy older adults aged 70 to 82 years are associated with living longer.

HOW TO KEEP FIT

- Choose activities you enjoy.
- Make being fit part of your everyday life. Playing with children, gardening, walking, dancing, and housecleaning are just a few activities that can improve your fitness.
- Combine a range of activities that include aerobic activity (see below), strengthening, flexibility, and balance.
- Start slow and gradually build up to a total of at least 30 minutes of activity a day on most days of the week. Activities can be broken up throughout the day.
- Keep safety in mind. Always wear comfortable, well-fitting shoes and use appropriate safety gear. Avoid outdoor activities in extreme cold or heat. Drink plenty of fluids while engaging in physical activity.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES

- **Aerobic activities** (exercises that increase oxygen use to improve heart and lung function) such as walking, gardening, and swimming can help strengthen your heart and lower your blood pressure and cholesterol. They can also improve your mood and sleep.
- Strengthening activities, such as repetitive lifting of light weights or even household items such as canned foods, can improve your muscle and bone health. Strengthening leg and hip muscles with leg weight exercises can help reduce your risk of falls.
- Flexibility and balancing exercises, such as tai chi, stretching, and yoga, can help prevent injuries and stiff joints.

BE AWARE OF DANGER SIGNS

Stop the activity and call your doctor if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- Pain or pressure in your chest, arms, neck, or jaw
- Developing pain in your legs, calves, or back
- Feeling lightheaded, nauseated, or weak
- Having an uncomfortable sensation of your heart beating too fast
- Becoming short of breath

Sources: National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health Medline Plus, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institute on Aging

Erin Brender, MD, Writer

Alison E. Burke, MA, Illustrator

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health Medline Plus
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases
www.niddk.nih.gov
- National Institute on Aging
www.niapublications.org/exercisebook/ExerciseGuideComplete.pdf

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on JAMA's Web site at www.jama.com. A Patient Page on fitness was published in the December 21, 2005, issue; and one on the benefits of regular physical activity was published in the June 14, 2000, issue.

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