

Senior Health: How to Exercise



No matter what your age, being active is a key to good health. And as you age, exercise helps keep up your energy, your strength and balance, your mood, and your independence.

What does "exercise" or "being active" mean for you? Your answer depends on whether you are feeling strong and well, out of shape or frail, or somewhere in between. But most people have choices. With your doctor's help, you can decide what works for you.

Benefits of regular exercise

Regular exercise makes your heart and other muscles stronger and healthier. You may notice that it improves your mood, lowers stress, and helps you control your weight.

Exercise offers you great medical benefits. When you get regular exercise, you lower your risks of early death, heart disease, stroke, metabolic syndrome, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, cholesterol problems, and some cancers.

And if you already have any of these problems, being active may help you to have better control over them, feel better, and live longer.

How to get more active

Talk to your doctor

Before you get more active or try a new type of exercise, talk to your doctor about what is safe for you. If you have different doctors for different health problems, choose one as your primary doctor. Make sure your primary doctor gets all your medical information.

Plan ahead

Set a long-term goal. Write down daily goals to help you get there.

Think about barriers that might get in your way. And then write down how you will reward yourself for reaching your goals.

Be sure to set goals that you can reach. Choose things you enjoy doing. Walking, hiking, swimming, water aerobics, bicycling, and dancing are all great exercise choices.

Plan to become as active as you can, as often as you can.

As long as you have no problem symptoms and you follow any limits your doctor sets, plan to work up to what health experts suggest for adults:

- Strengthen the major muscle groups 2 or more days a week. These include your arms, legs, abdominal muscles, and back.
- Get at least 2½ hours of moderate exercise a week. One way to do this is to be active 30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week. It is fine to be active in blocks of 10 minutes or more throughout your day and week.

Get started

- When starting something new, start easy and go slow. Each day or so, slightly increase how long and how hard you are active.

- If you find it hard to be active by yourself, find a group, class, or friend you can enjoy being active with.
- Do not push yourself too hard.

For aerobic exercise, there is an easy way to know if your heart rate is at the right level. If you cannot talk and exercise at the same time, you are working too hard. If you can talk while you exercise, you are doing fine. If you can sing while you exercise, you may not be working hard enough.

Exercise safely

Be safe

- Avoid holding your breath when doing exercises such as push-ups and sit-ups. Also avoid heavy lifting.
- Do not exercise outdoors when it is very cold, very hot, or very humid. When the weather is bad, exercise indoors or walk at a mall.
- Do not take hot or cold showers or sauna baths right after you exercise. Very hot or very cold temperatures can be dangerous.
- Watch for signs that you are doing too much. Some minor soreness or stiffness is to be expected at first, but pain is a warning sign to stop.

Be flexible

- If you are about to start a new medicine or dose, ask your doctor whether you should change your exercise program. New medicines can affect how you feel when you exercise.

- If you feel really tired the day after exercise, exercise more slowly or for a shorter time until you can work up to a better pace.
- If your exercise routine has been interrupted for more than a couple of days, do a little less. Gradually increase to your regular activity level.
- Discuss your progress with your doctor. He or she may be able to help if you have problems.

Don't overdo it

Pay attention to your body's signals. Stop exercising if:

- You think you might be having a heart attack. **Call 911 right away.** Symptoms include pain, pressure, or a strange feeling in your chest, back, neck, jaw, upper belly, arm, or shoulder.
- You are panting or are very short of breath.
- You feel sick to your stomach.
- You have pain, joint discomfort, or muscle cramps that won't go away.
- You have any other symptoms that bother you.